

Connections

Abraham Joshua Heschel

A week before his death on December 23, 1972, Abraham Heschel sent to his publisher the finished manuscript of a book to be titled *A Passion for Sincerity*. It is a study, as he explained it, of two founders of Hasidic Judaism in whom he found striking parallels with Soren Kierkegaard, although of course the Polish rabbis and the father of Christian existentialism were unaware of one another's existence. He said that all his life he had owed such a book in tribute to his Hasidic formation, and with this manuscript he felt the obligation discharged in small part.

The son of a distinguished Polish rabbinical family, Heschel's debt to the Hasidim was freely acknowledged, as is obvious to all who knew him or read his many books. His relationship to contemporary Hasidic movements was more ambivalent. He visited several times my parish in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, where, among many other things, Hasidic Judaism in this country is centered, but he was generally cool to my enthusiasm for some aspects of the modernity-defying solidarity of the Hasidic community. "You cannot understand. It is beautiful, but it is also stifling. True piety is not meant to be preserved like a museum piece, it is meant to sanctify the secular." Abraham Heschel's life effort was to capture the resources of sacred passion and piety for the sanctification of the secular.

Father Heschel, as we called him, was never so presumptuous as to credit those admirers who saw in him a prophet of biblical dimensions. But in his commitment to the oppressed, especially to the victims of racial injustice and of war, one could not help but perceive in Heschel something of the characteristics he attributed to the prophets: "To us a single act of injustice—cheating in business, exploitation of the poor—is slight; to the prophets, a disaster. To us injustice is injurious to the welfare of the people; to the prophets it is a deathblow to existence: to us, an episode; to them, a catastrophe, a threat to the world. Their breathless impatience with injustice may strike us as hysteria. . . . To the prophets even a minor injustice assumes cosmic proportions" (*The Prophets*).

To the worldly wise, who had learned to take a modicum of evil in stride, Heschel seemed unbalanced in his indignation, almost naive in his inexhaustible outrage. Yet even the sophisticates admitted to a certain fascination, not unmixed with fear, with this "patriarch of Israel" who trembled under the intimations of divine judgment. To some others, Jews and Christians alike, divine judgment was an amenable metaphor; to Heschel it was the linchpin of personal and historical existence.



Those who attended the numerous religious and political gatherings at which he spoke knew him as a man of powerful presence and even more powerful language. His sense of theatre was largely unconscious, but he took no offense at the suggestion he had been playing the role of patriarch since his mid-thirties. Many expressed surprise at discovering he was so young (he was only sixty-five when he died), so much did his presence suggest the ancient. It was not appearance alone, for physically he looked no more than his age. Yet I have on different occasions heard people say that were they, like Michelangelo, to paint a picture of God, he would look like Abraham Heschel. Nor was it simply a manner, for the same manner assumed by others seems false and pretentious. The truth is that, in an age unfamiliar with holiness, Heschel was a holy man. Touched by the ecstasies of the mystics and the divine madness of the prophets, bearing the righteous man's burden of history's horror, Heschel at times appeared as an utterance of the eternity with which he was incurably in love.

Especially on social questions he worked closely with theological liberals, both Jewish and Christian, but was himself profoundly conservative. It was not despite, but because of, his accountability to tradition that he was radically opposed to social injustice. During the sixties he was honestly puzzled and frequently offended by the theological celebration of secularism and—to him most outrageous—the talk about the death of God. Learned as he was in the philosophical history of nihilism and atheism, and sympathetic as he was to what was valid in that antireligious protest, Heschel viewed the Christian secularity and Christian atheist faddists of the sixties as recklessly ignorant children; he expressed the fear that their popularity might

well signal the end of Christian theology.

He viewed with greater sympathy the later "theology of hope," although he was suspicious of so much Hegel and decidedly opposed to what he viewed as an extreme emphasis on Christology; but at least Pannenberg and others took religious phenomenology seriously, and that, combined with the biblical hope of the Kingdom, supplied some basis for theological exchange between Jews and Christians. However, it was my impression—especially in the latter years and despite his continuing ambivalence about the subject—that Heschel grew less interested in formal "ecumenical dialogue" and more urgently driven to fulfill his work as an emphatically Jewish theologian.

Heschel has been described as a man who lived in two worlds, that of Eastern European Jewry and that of Western philosophy and civilization. This rings true, and he did succeed in synthesizing these thought worlds in a way that made it possible to talk theology with Heschel as was not possible with some other Jewish theologians. In recent years, or so it seems to me, synthesis was more a habit than a deliberate goal. "I can only be of use to Christians and others to the extent that I am fully a Jew," he said on several occasions. Thus, after his first heart attacks, he turned more and more urgently to scholarly work on rabbinical texts and history. This was clearly the chief work he had to finish in the time left him. And he was right; as he moved farther from formal concern with Christian or secular thought, and as he illuminated the corrective contrast that is Jewish tradition, his contribution to all of us was multiplied.

As a young man in Berlin in the 1930's he was first seized with the imperative to bring the experience of Eastern Jewry into synthesis with Western thought. Along with many Jewish intellectuals of the time, he thought seriously at one point of becoming a Christian. He early and definitively rejected that course. But the desire of Christians, whether secret or overt, to see Jews convert to Christianity never ceased to be a sore point of extreme sensitivity. "Do you really think, way down in your heart, that I should have become a Christian?" he asked on several occasions. I suspect I never entirely satisfied him on this point, for surely my eschatological hope is inseparable from the universal acknowledgment of the lordship of Jesus the Christ. Yet the bond of mutual trust was secured by the fact that both of us acted in the courage of our uncertainties, confident only that the God of Abraham, Jacob, Isaac and Jesus would keep faith with the covenant that, in its fulfillment, transcends the present provisional forms of both Judaism and Christianity.

Much more should be said, has been said and will be said about Abraham Heschel as a theologian. It was in his role as a re-

ligious social activist that I first came to work closely with Father Heschel (I trust it is evident from the above that this role was in no way separable from his vocation as a theologian). In October, 1965, about twenty-five clergy held a news conference to defend David Miller and others who had protested American involvement in Vietnam and had been accused of treason by, among others, several members of Congress. It was an ad hoc gathering, but toward the end of the conference one of the newsmen asked what we intended to do about the war beyond issuing this statement. Heschel answered with great confidence that of course we were not going to let matters rest here; we had many more plans in the works, about which we would notify the press in due time. This was the first the rest of us had heard about such plans.

As Heschel explained later, he really had nothing specific in mind, but it would never do to let people think we were not serious about a long-term effort to end the war. Not even in our most pessimistic moments did anyone suspect the long term could be as long as it has proved to be. In any case, Heschel had committed us, and before the meeting broke up we had formed "Clergy Concerned About Vietnam" and elected Heschel, Daniel Berrigan and this writer as co-chairmen. One might reasonably speculate that, as the war grew, something like Clergy and Laity Concerned (as it is now called) would have been formed in any case. In fact it was formed with that particular nucleus and at that particular time because of the initiative of Abraham Heschel.

Heschel's face and words keep reappearing in all my memories of the conferences, mobilizations, planning sessions, rallies and demonstrations of the turbulent years since 1965. In the Pentagon office of then Defense Secretary McNamara: Heschel raising questions about the human costs of war and McNamara referring such "political" questions to the State Department, limiting himself to explaining with an air of great efficiency why the "fire curtains" the U.S. was throwing up around the "V.C." would prove to be impenetrable. Or, Heschel with Henry Kissinger, a month after Mr. Nixon's first inauguration, trying to evoke from the Harvard professor some residual capacity for moral reflection that Heschel thought must have been instilled in his Jewish boyhood. Kissinger was politely condescending in his response that that was not how things worked in the real world. Give them a little time, said Kissinger, and if in nine months we did not see the war ending, he would join us in our demonstration. That was February, 1969.

And many times Heschel with Martin King. Speaking from the same platform, marching arm in arm, discussing strategy and fears in rooms filled with smoke from my very little cigars and from Heschel's very big and very bad cigars. King and Heschel both had what used to be called the grand manner. They

deferred to one another, each respecting the claims of the other's religious ethnarchy. But chiefly I remember Heschel not with the great or the well known (although he took a natural pleasure in the company of famous people) but in small or large groups of ordinary people whom he willed—almost by injecting, as it were, his own anguish—to make extraordinary in their passion for peace. While never letting up on his scholarly work, he traveled more than he should have, spoke more than he should have, always insisting that everything he did was nothing compared to the ongoing horror of the war. There is a sense in which Heschel's premature death is yet another casualty to be attributed to America's war in Indochina.

That the Middle East was never really on the action agenda of Clergy and Laity was a disappointment to Heschel, but he understood better than most the depth of the differences that precluded a united approach toward Israel among all who opposed the Vietnam war. After the "Six-Day War" Heschel visited Israel and wrote his *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*. In some quarters the book was criticized as a veritable call to holy war, and at least one reviewer lamented Heschel's lapse from his devotion to peace-making. Heschel felt hurt by the failure to understand that his writing about Israel was not, in any conventional sense, an essay on the ethics of international relations but a theological statement regarding Israel's role in God's designs in history. He privately granted that he had perhaps not been as careful as he might have been to make this distinction clear. Admittedly the distinction is not an easy one. Heschel, incidentally, was not as impressed as were some other Jewish leaders by the theological defense of Israel offered during and after the Six-Day War by Billy Graham and other American "evangelicals." He fully realized that their apparent sympathy was premised upon a conversionism essentially hostile to Judaism as a distinct and valid expression of biblical faith.

Nor did Heschel credit for a moment the argument popular in some circles that American Jews should, in order to secure Administration support for Israel, mute their protest against U.S. policy in Indochina. He viewed such an acceptance of a "trade-off" as unspeakably immoral and felt that those who suggested it would turn American Jewry into nothing more than a political party. This was offensive to his whole understanding of the Jewish people, who had been entrusted with the Law in order to witness against evil in a way entirely indifferent to any interest except that justice might prevail.

Father Heschel had no illusions that the Kingdom of God would be established by our efforts or revolutionary programs. In this sense he was very much a religious realist. "At the end of days, evil will be conquered by the One; in historic

times evils must be conquered one by one," he wrote in *Israel*. Our spiritual task is, by prayer and witness, to sustain the hope in God's faithfulness; our practical task is not to establish the Kingdom but to struggle against the evils that deny God's ultimate sovereignty.

In our conversations by phone or in person, often several times a week, we would review current developments, most of which were a cause of great grief to Heschel. He was disappointed but not surprised by George McGovern's defeat in 1972 and was inclined to see in Richard Nixon's victory a widespread indifference to the sufferings of the war and of the poor in this country. Three days before he died, in the last public statement on which he worked, calling for a "Religious Convocation for Peace" in Washington, January 3-4, Heschel approved particularly of the assertion that "what used to be called a credibility gap is fast becoming a moral abyss."

Following Henry Kissinger's preelection news conference of October 26 ("Peace is at hand"), I suggested that it would simply be too horrible to believe that such a promise would be made on the eve of an election if it were not true. Heschel disagreed strongly, finding nothing too horrible to believe. "Put not your trust in princes," he cited from Psalm 146. After the intensification of the bombing, Heschel chided me, expressing disappointment that I too had been tempted to succumb to that "inveterate optimism" that so marred the Christian understanding of history. And, of course, the most rational arguments for having given credence to the promise of October 26 collapsed before subsequent events.

In *The Sabbath* Heschel wrote: "The historian Ranke claimed that every age is equally near to God. Yet Jewish tradition claims that there is a hierarchy of moments within time, that all ages are not alike. Man may pray to God equally at all places, but God does not speak to man equally at all times. At a certain moment, for example, the spirit of prophecy departed from Israel." I think it fair to say that Heschel felt our moment in history to be far from God. And, yet—and although Heschel would protest the suggestion—in Abraham Heschel was evidence that the spirit of prophecy had not forsaken us entirely.

Finally, also in *The Sabbath*, he wrote: "All our life should be a pilgrimage to the seventh day; the thought and appreciation of what this day may bring to us should be ever present in our minds. For the Sabbath is the counterpoint of living; the melody sustained throughout all agitations and vicissitudes which menace our conscience; our awareness of God's presence in the world." "The Sabbath is not for the sake of the weekdays; the weekdays are for the sake of Sabbath." He died on Sabbath morning. For Abraham Joshua Heschel the weekdays are past.



RICHARD J. NEUHAUS