

A Review in Tribute

Franklin Sherman

Abraham Joshua Heschel was among the best known of religious figures on the American scene, yet in many respects he was a puzzle, even a mystery. What were the sources of his remarkable eloquence, his ability to cut to the heart of social and ethical issues, his unique version of Jewish spirituality? Some sources he revealed in his books on the prophets and on ancient rabbinic thought. Then in his last book, *A Passion for Truth* (Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux; 336 pp.; \$8.95), delivered to the publisher a few weeks before his death, he pays tribute to another great mentor, the nineteenth-century Hasidic *rebbe*, Reb Menahem Mendl of Kotzk.

Little known to the world of scholarship and unmentioned even in some standard histories of Judaism, the Rabbi of Kotzk was, to Heschel, the Jewish Kierkegaard. Like Kierkegaard he was plentifully endowed with Unamuno's "tragic sense of life." Like Kierkegaard he was a bitter critic of the religious establishment and routines of conventional piety. Like Kierkegaard he had come "for the revival and increase of inwardness." Like Kierkegaard Reb Mendl felt impelled to make a breach in normal human relationships, spending his last twenty years in solitude.

The Rabbi of Kotzk seems to have shared the radical critique of all things human that we associate with the early Barth. Yet just as Barth's continued wrestling with the Christian sources forced him to move to a more dialectical position, a mix of affirmation and critique, so too the Kotzker's Jewish faith would not permit him to despair utterly of God's creation. "Joy in spite of anguish" was his theme, in contrast to the more direct and simple life affirmation of the founder of Hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov. These two, the one a great Nay-sayer and the other a great Yea-sayer, were his own most special mentors, Heschel confesses. In the Introduction to the present volume, "Why I Had to Write This Book," he explains that he had dealt elsewhere with the life and spirit of the Baal Shem; now he thought it time to come to terms also with the other side of his heritage and to relate the one to the other.

His conclusion, as I understand it, is that each of these two great spiritual masters is correct on his own level. We must affirm, to borrow from Augustine, that "being *qua* being is good." The mission of the Baal Shem was to teach Jews once again to make

this affirmation; thus the joy, even the ecstasy, of the dance with the Torah in the Hasidic movement. And yet . . . the world, especially human society and culture as we experience it, is far from good and must be subjected to radical judgment. That was the mission of the Rabbi of Kotzk. His watchword was "truth," *Emeth*; the chief category of his social criticism was "falsehood." He saw his society as deceiving and self-deceived.

The Rabbi of Kotzk, living in the cultural isolation imposed upon East European Judaism, applied this critique especially to the religious community. It is Heschel's own contribution to have broadened it to embrace "secular" questions as well. The Heschel whom we knew as a passionate critic of American culture during the 1960's, focusing first on its radical hypocrisy and then on its Vietnam policy, might well have proclaimed as his the Kotzker's maxim: "Undeceive yourselves!"

It seems the Rabbi of Kotzk is the source of a motif that sounds throughout Heschel's writings, namely, *dismay*. The capacity to feel dismay, like the capacity to feel awe, Heschel taught us, is basic to being human. These two categories he learned, respectively, from the Kotzker and the Baal Shem Tov. For the Christian they constitute the dialectic between Creation and Fall, between Reinhold Niebuhr's "original righteousness" and "Original Sin."

Like most of Heschel's writings the book is loosely organized. It is difficult to piece together a coherent picture of the Kotzker's career or to discover the precise sources to which Heschel alludes. The style, as usual, is a delight. Abraham Heschel, who first learned the English language as an immigrant to this country in his fourth decade of life, must surely be ranked among the finest stylists among theologians or philosophers of religion writing in English in our time. Knowingly or not, he was in fact writing theological poetry. This is said not to detract from the truth-value of what he said but to pay tribute to an ability to clothe thoughts in words exactly suiting his purpose and appealing to the reader on many levels.

The portion of the book devoted to a detailed comparison of the Kotzker and Kierkegaard is the most extended discussion of Christian theology anywhere in Heschel's writings. If it breaks no new ground in Kierkegaard scholarship, it is nonetheless a striking example of the ability to enter into another faith-perspective; it is further reason for regret that Heschel is not here to engage us in ever deeper dimensions of Jewish-Christian dialogue. The parallels Heschel discovers between these two contemporaries—the Danish Lutheran and the Polish Jew—are truly remarkable. No doubt it would be his hope that just as Kierkegaard came into his own earlier in this century with the rise of existentialism and dialectical theology, so too Reb Menahem Mendl of Kotzk might in due course be more fully recognized for his distinctive contributions to Jewish thought.

This month marks the second anniversary of the death of Abraham Joshua Heschel. FRANKLIN SHERMAN is Professor of Christian Ethics, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and author of *The Promise of Heschel*.