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# Seeing With Both Eyes:
# Analysis and Reflection on Abraham Joshua Heschel's Interrogation of the "Super-Rational"

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# Table of Contents

# Abbreviations of Works By Abraham Joshua Heschel

*GSM*: *God In Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955.

*HT*: *Heavenly Torah as Refracted Through the Generations*. Translated by Gordon Tucker with Leonard Levin. New York: Crossroad, 2005.

*MGSA*: *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*. Edited by Susannah Heschel. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996.

*MNA: Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1951.

*Prophets*: *The Prophets: An Introduction*. New York: Haper, 1962.

*PT*: *A Passion for Truth*. Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont. 1973.

*TMHS*: *Torah min ha-shamayim be-aspaklaria shel ha-dorot*. Sefer Magid, Jerusalem, Israel. 2021

# 1. Introduction: Heschel as a Guide for How to Develop a Theology

My journey with theology began when I was nine years old and I stared up at the 1,109 light bulbs that line the synagogue of my youth, Congregation Sherith Israel in San Francisco. As Cantor Martin Feldman sang *Avinu Malkeinu*, I was overcome by the splendor of his operatic voice, the yellow of its light bulbs and majesty of that sanctuary with the reds and blues of its stained glass windows. I experienced what I now know Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel described as "awe"[1] and "radical amazement."[2]

I've felt this overwhelming sense of amazement at other moments in my life. I'll never forget one evening as a thirteen-year-old boy at summer camp. A group of teenagers and I had hiked through a Northern California forest to the bluffs overlooking the ocean. I remember distinctly that as we approached our campsite I was discussing a card game with two friends and the teenagers behind me were gossiping about other campers. But then we saw the sunset. The yellow of the dry grass of the California summer gave way to the blue of the ocean, which gave way to the orange, yellow and even purple of the setting sun. Our conversations of games and gossip evaporated. We were transfixed. I felt the need to write in my journal. I sat down and desperately tried to draw and describe in words what I saw.

These early moments had a lasting effect on me, although, in keeping with the extent to which Heschel described these experiences as "ineffable,"[3] I didn't know how to put these experiences into words.

When I was in my early twenties, I read Heschel's *GSM* for the first time. This book offered me a vocabulary with which to explain some of the most important moments of my

[1] *GSM,* 75
[2] *GSM*, 45
[3] *GSM*, 20

life. According to Heschel, the experience of awe leads one to belief in God. Heschel wrote, "Awe precedes faith; it is at the root of faith."[4]

This experience of awe has been my spiritual rock. Through difficulty, questioning and uncertainty, this sense of awe has given me a sense of purpose and direction. When I applied to rabbinical school, I wrote that the experience of awe that Heschel described rests at the center of what I want to do as a rabbi.

Still, as I have grown older, I have experienced other forms of spiritual connection.

In 2013, I lived with Kate, who is now my wife, in Haiti in a school with a group that practiced a service-oriented form of yoga. Every night we would come together with the Haitians who lived and volunteered in the school to chant "*babanam kevalam*," which in Sanskrit means "everything is love." The school was next to a children's home for boys without families. These boys had lived extremely difficult lives -- many of them had been the victims of sexual trafficking. One night many of the boys joined us for our singing meditation. Singing with them, as they chanted "*babanam kevalam*" shamelessly off-key at the top of their lungs, I felt a warm and overwhelming sense of connection. As we sang "*babanam kevalam*," "everything is love," the words we were saying seemed true.

When I analyze this moment in Haiti, I am left with an understanding of God that is different from the God of awe that was so powerful in my early life. The experiences in my synagogue and on the bluffs seemed to indicate the existence of a transcendent God, a God who created the universe, but whom we can only apprehend through glimpses that indicate the existence of something beyond ourselves. When I sat in the synagogue and on bluffs, it felt that God was something incredible that I could only almost know, but I felt certainty that God and I were separate things. And yet my experience singing and dancing with the

[4] *GSM,* 77

children in Haiti leads me toward belief in an absolute oneness, a God who is one with the world, and a universe that is one with God. These moments of religious insight have led me to conflicting conclusions about fundamental theological questions. Sometimes, I feel the presence of a God who is greater than us and beyond us; at other times I feel a cosmic oneness in the universe. How is it possible that God is at once above and beyond the world, and that God and the universe are one?

The contradictions in my personal theology have been especially pronounced when I think about the question of whether I believe the common adage "everything happens for a reason."

My daughter Selah was born in December of last year. When my wife, one of her grandmothers and I took Selah to the hospital garage to take her home, I noticed a white van parked next to our car. People were loading a body on a stretcher covered in a velvet cloth into the van. At that moment, as I felt the emotion of bringing my daughter home for the first time, it felt to me that the van was there as more than a coincidence. It seemed as though the van was there to teach us a message about the cycle of life. As we excitedly prepared to take our three-day-old girl home to begin her life, it seemed the van was intended to be there to remind us of the precariousness and preciousness of life.

And yet, at other moments in my life I do not believe such an intentional sign is possible. I find myself believing that God -- to the extent we can even begin to understand God -- is not an entity that can interfere in the world to teach us lessons. God is instead the sacred oneness of the universe. I don't pretend to completely understand this conception of God, but I am confident that God doesn't intervene in the world. In this case, I know that

people are born and die in hospitals everyday and that the van being parked next to our car was hardly even a coincidence.

As I've studied theology, I've encountered thinkers who offer coherent theologies. Before entering rabbinical school, I read a few books by the Rabbi Harold Kushner. Kushner described a God who is not all-powerful, but a God who can provide us with comfort and resilience in our worst moments. Kushner theology is sophisticated and borne out by his life experience. It is also logically consistent: he believes that God is not omnipotent; that God helps is a powerful force in the universe who can help us overcome challenges, but that God is ultimately not at fault for unjust suffering.[5]

A few years ago I encountered the work of the prominent Jewish theologian Arthur Green. Green also offered a theological worldview that is logically consistent. He wrote, "From the moment when I first heard the Hasidic teaching that only God (Y-H-W-H) exists, and that all is part of the One, I instinctively knew it to be true. Not only true but The Truth."[6]

As much as both Kushner's and Green's theologies resonate with me, I am not able to say that I believe either to be the entire truth. Unlike Kushner, I sometimes find myself praying to a God who *can* intervene in the world. Unlike Green, I sometimes do think there is a distinction between us and God. Sometimes it feels as if everything isn't one.

This has left me frustrated. Are we only left with our discrete moments of insight? Should we give up on the prospect of having them coalesce into coherent belief? If theology is the process of arriving at stable and coherent conclusions about God and how we fit into the universe, is true theology something to aspire to?

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[5] Kushner, 42-44
[6] Green, "Hasidism Without Supernaturalism"

Many thinkers have sought to develop theologies. But as I've learned more about Heschel, I've returned to him as a source of guidance. Heschel centered the God of awe in his work, but Heschel also offered alternative perspectives on theology. What emerged is a theology that contains differing components. As we will see, Heschel saw the world in terms of polarities and offered contrasting perspectives on fundamental religious questions. He wrote at one point, "God is both immanent and transcendent."[7]

Heschel's biography also positions him well to model for us how to develop a theology. Born in Warsaw, Poland in 1907, Heschel emerged out of a world that prized being in a state of awe and other religious concerns. He was the descendent of prominent Hasidic dynasties on both sides of his family and he received a rigorous traditional Jewish education.[8] At the end of his life, Heschel described his upbringing as immersing him in a world of rich religious tradition. He told the interviewer Carl Stern: "I was very fortunate in having lived as a child, and as a young boy, in an environment where there were many people I could revere, people concerned with problems of inner life, of spirituality, and integrity. People who have shown great compassion and understanding for other people."[9]

Heschel also received a prestigious secular education. He earned a doctorate from the University of Berlin in 1933, as well as a liberal rabbinic ordination from the academically-oriented *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* in 1934. Heschel was therefore attuned through both his disposition and his education to religious concerns as well as the rigorous application of reason present in both traditional Jewish learning and secular thought.

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[7] *HT,* 710
[8] *MGSA*, Kindle Location 111
[9] *MGSA*, Kindle Location 7932

After stays in Warsaw and London, in 1940 Heschel escaped Europe and came to the United States to teach at the Hebrew Union College. Many of his family members including his mother were murdered by Nazis in the Shoah.[10]

In 1945 Heschel became a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary, where he taught until his death in 1972. Over the course of his life, Heschel published works on theology, prayer, social issues, the rabbinic tradition, Jewish mysticism and the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. As we will see, Heschel's writing provides a useful model for developing a theology in part because of the consistency of his work -- the wide range of his writings generally cohere around a single theology, even if that theology contains paradoxes and unresolved tensions.[11] By drawing from Heschel's various works, we can therefore get a comprehensive view of how Hescel developed his theology.

Before proceeding further, it will be useful to provide a brief overview of the content of Heschel's theology. One of the most important principles in Heschel's theology is that most theology makes a fundamental mistake by beginning with humans in order to understand the universe. Heschel explained, "Most theories of religion start out with defining the religious situation as man's search for God and maintain the axiom that God is silent, hidden and unconcerned with man's search for him. [...] To Biblical thinking, the definition is incomplete and the axiom is false. The Bible speaks not only of man's search for God, but

[10] A.J. Heschel's daughter Susannah Heschel offered a detailed account of her father's life in the introduction to *MGSA*. She wrote: "When the Nazis invaded Poland, my father's sister Esther was killed in a bombing. His mother and sister Gittel had to abandon their apartment, and their circumstances became very difficult. They sent postcards in which they worried lovingly about his well-being and begged for news of his safety. "Each day that we receive a letter from you," Gittel wrote, "is a holiday for us." Both were ultimately murdered, his mother in Warsaw, Gittel most probably in Treblinka. Another sister, Devorah, who was married and living in Vienna, was eventually deported to Theresienstadt on October 2, 1942, and from there sent to Auschwitz, where she was murdered upon her arrival on May 16, 1944." *MGSA*, Kindle Location 321

[11] Scholars including Shai Held have remarked at how Heschel's theology remained consistent over the course of his life. See Held, 26

also of *God's search for man.*"[12] Heschel therefore took a theocentric rather than an anthropocentric view of the universe. *God*, not humanity, is the central actor in the story of the universe. Heschel described a God who created the universe and humanity, but who chose to endow humanity with free will and the capacity to do evil. Heschel wrote that God's need for humanity is a "self-imposed concern. God is now in need of man, because he freely made him a partner in His enterprise, 'a partner in the work of creation.'"[13] In this, God cares deeply for humanity and yearns for humanity to return to the ways God prescribes. Even if God created humanity and remains more powerful than humanity, God needs humanity. Heschel wrote, "It is as if God were unwilling to be alone, and he had chosen man to serve Him. [...] All of human history as described in the Bible may be summarized in one phrase: *God is in search of man.*"[14]

Heschel elaborated on this idea of God needing humanity through his concept of "divine pathos." Heschel contrasted the God of the divine pathos of the Hebrew Bible with the Greek philosophers' conception of detached God that is indifferent to human affairs.[15] Unlike this God detached from humanity, the God of the prophets cares deeply about human life and history. Heschel wrote, "To the prophet, God does not reveal himself in an abstract absoluteness, but in a personal and intimate relations to the world."[16] In this way, God experiences a pathos for humanity that suprasses even love, and includes a range of strongly felt emotions. Heschel wrote, "Pathos includes love, but goes beyond it. God's relation to man is not an indiscriminate outpouring of goodness, oblivious to the condition and merit of

[12] *GSM*, 136
[13] *MNA*, 243
[14] *GSM*, 136
[15] *Prophets*, 297
[16] *Prophets*, 288

the recipient, but an intimate accessibility, manifesting itself in His sensitive and manifold reactions."[17]

Heschel's intellectual focus on divine pathos was matched throughout his life by a commitment to actualizing the prophetic vision that underlies this thinking -- Heschel applied the ethical imperatives of his theology to his political involvement. He was an outspoken advocate for civil rights in the United States and critic of the Vietnam War.[18] His best known saying is the sentence "I felt my legs were praying," which he told his daughter Susannah Heschel to describe the experience of marching in Selma, Alabama with Martin Luther King in 1965.[19]

Looking at Heschel's work as a means through which to explore the question of how to develop a theology is appealing to me in part because of the extent to which Heschel drew on the entire Jewish corpus to develop his theology. As Rabbi Michael Marmur examined, Heschel cited heavily from a very wide gamut of Jewish sources. Marmur wrote, "No other Jewish thinker of note in the twentieth century, appealing to an audience of modern Jews and non-Jews, used such a panoply of texts, and so extensively."[20] As Marmur argued, Heschel used the Jewish library as a means through which to consider his theology in the twentieth century. Marmur considered Heschel's use of the image the "*aspaklaria*," which is a central concept in Heschel's thought and most literally refers to a looking glass through which one can see through refraction. Marmur wrote that, for Heschel the "*aspaklaria* of the generations" "can be understood as a complex optical device through which the past is seen through the prism of the present, and the present perceived through the prism of the past."[21]

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[17] *Prophets*, 363
[18] *MGSA,* Kindle location 91
[19] *MGSA*, Kindle location 91
[20] Marmur, 8
[21] Marmur, 6

Therefore, although this exploration of how to develop a theology is fundamentally about how Heschel constructed his theology, when one considers Heschel, one is in fact considering Heschel considering Jewish tradition.

In what follows I will both analyze how Heschel developed his theology and offer short reflections on Heschel's approach in light of my own experience as someone seeking to discover what they believe. I will offer analysis of Heschel's method for developing his theology and after each section of analysis, I will reflect from my own experience on how Heschel's work may resonate with the search of a contemporary person in search of meaning. The sections in which I analyze Heschel's theology follow an admittedly artificially linear progression: first we will look at how Heschel developed a theology (Section 2), then we will look at what this method led him to believe (Sections 4 and 6), and finally we will look at the consequences of his belief (Sections 8 and 10). This linear reconstruction of Heschel's theological process is artificial: Heschel's own theological development and any contemporary process of developing a theology certainly wouldn't follow such a straightforward progression. Still, this linear reconstruction is useful because it allows us to better understand and learn from Heschel's method.

As I follow how Heschel developed his theology and offer reflections on this process, an important theme will emerge: Heschel returned explicitly and implicitly to the claim that theological knowledge ought to be "super-rational,"[22] meaning that this type of knowing goes beyond what can be understood through reason alone. As we will see, Heschel values reason, but Heschel ultimately hints at a type of truth that is more powerful than reason and that can even go against what is strictly rational. One of the themes of this exploration in both the

[22] Heschel used the term "super-rational" three times in *GSM*. See *GSM*, 18, 103 and 105. He employed a similar term "*supra rationem*" in *PT*, see 288.

analysis and reflection sections will be to think through the nature of this quest for higher truth, its potential risks and how to sustain it.

How do we determine what we believe? With Heschel as a guide, we will endeavor to find out.

# 2. Analysis: Heschel's Method for Theology

## A. Heschel's Invested Phenomenology of Religious Experience

Toward the beginning of *GSM*, Heschel made a distinction between "conceptual thinking" and "situational thinking." He defined "conceptual thinking" as "an act of reasoning" aimed at enhancing knowledge about the world. "Situational thinking" on the other hand, "involves an inner experience." Heschel explained that in *GSM,* he will use "situational thinking."[23]

By setting up this distinction, Heschel laid the groundwork for what may be called a phenomenology of personal experience. Heschel believed that one way to arrive at theological knowledge is to observe and then analyze what happens when one has moments of religious insight. Heschel's method was not to engage in detached philosophical inquiry, but instead to observe what happened *to himself* when he had moments of spiritual insight. To be clear, Heschel didn't say explicitly that when he engaged in this "situational thinking" he was analyzing his own experience. Instead, Heschel implied that the religious encounters he described are universal. Heschel wrote, "The sense of the ineffable, the awareness of the grandeur and mystery of living, is shared by all men [...]."[24] Even if the experiences Heschel described are in fact universal (which is a point that is strongly contested by readers of Heschel),[25] it is clear based on the vividness of his recountings of spiritual experiences that he was in fact describing something he had experienced himself. Furthermore, when Heschel indicated that he will engage in "situational thinking" it becomes clear that he was an

[23] *GSM*, 5
[24] *GSM*, 65
[25] As Held pointed out, Heschel's method of universalizing his own experience raises difficult questions. Most notably it showed a "lack of critical reflectiveness" (Held, 126) as to his own cultural milieu and the extent to which other people may experience the world differently. I will explore this problem of the universalization of mystical experiences in the reflection of Section 3.

invested party in this inquiry. As he wrote: "Situational thinking is necessary when we are engaged in an effort to understand issues on which we stake our very existence."[26]

Once Heschel established this methodology of observing his own mystical encounters, he observed that these experiences happened in momentary flashes. One of Heschel's most vivid descriptions of becoming conscious of God occurred in his book *MNA*. Heschel wrote, "A tremor seizes our limbs; our nerves are struck, quiver like strings; our whole being bursts into shudders. But then a cry, wrested from our very core, fills the world around us, as if a mountain were suddenly about to place itself in front of us. It is one word: 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."[27]

As the scholar Rabbi Shai Held argued, Heschel was at his best when he was depicting spiritual experience.[28] In this citation in particular, and *GSM* more generally, Heschel creatively and evocatively described these encounters. He wrote that the experiences of "wonder," "awe," and "radical amazement" lead one to realize that the world is an "allusion" to something that is totally beyond our comprehension -- to God. Heschel wrote:

> Awe is the awareness of transcendent meaning, of a spiritual suggestiveness of reality, an allusiveness to transcendent meaning. The world in its grandeur is full of a spiritual radiance, for which we have neither name nor concept.[29]

It is important to note that for Heschel awareness of God happened in one decisive flash. As the scholar Held explained, it is not as if Heschel believed that one sees something amazing and that leads one to deduce that God exists. Held wrote, "It is critical that we

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[26] *GSM*, 5
[27] *MNA*, 78
[28] Held, 66
[29] *GSM*, 106

understand what Heschel is *not* saying: he is emphatically not suggesting that we begin with the experience of wonder and proceed from there to infer the existence of God. On the contrary, Heschel insists time and again, the reality of God is an immediate apprehension, an 'intuition' or 'insight' rather than a logical inference."[30]

Here, at this early step in the development of Heschel's theology, we see that Heschel turned to a way of knowing that can be understood as coming before reason. As we have seen, the intuition he described is pre-rational; it happens before one makes any logical inferences. As we will see, the steps of Heschel's theology will later progress into the "super-rational," meaning that even after one applies reason, truths exist that go beyond what can be understood rationally. Nevertheless, the origins of this super-rational means for understanding lie in this pre-rational step that Heschel also described as "intuition."[31]

Heschel was clear that even though experiences of awe or radical amazement are "allusions" to God, that doesn't mean we have an immediate understanding of who or what God is. On the contrary, Heschel was clear that the God we encounter is beyond our comprehension and "ineffable."[32] Heschel specified that these moments of insight don't allow us to have a definitive understanding of who or what God is.

Heschel offered another important limitation on our capacities to understand the ineffable: he was very clear that our flashes of insight are fleeting. Following his vivid description of insight in *MNA*, he wrote, "An inspiration passes, having been inspired never

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[30] Held, 54

[31] *GSM*, 74.
Heschel scholar Rabbi Gordon Tucker described how contemporaneous to Heschel's writing, mathematicians had come to the conclusion that mathematics relies on more than what can be proven rationally. "There will always be truths of mathematics that cannot be proven with our systemic tools, but that we can nevertheless see to be true," Tucker wrote. Mathematicians therefore concluded during Heschel's lifetime that "intuitions" are something mathematics "cannot proceed without." (Tucker, 132)

[32] *GSM*, 80

passes. It remains like an island across the restlessness of time."[33] Heschel taught that in order to arrive at theology, we ought to analyze these flashes of insight and deduce what we can from them. Heschel wrote, "We have to press the religious consciousness with questions, compelling man to understand and unravel the meaning of what is taking place in his life as it stands at the divine horizon. By penetrating the consciousness of the pious man, we may conceive the reality behind it."[34] Heschel suggested that the way to "press the religious consciousness" is to probe it through the rational interrogation of philosophy, which led to what he calls a "philosophy of religion." He wrote, "Philosophy is reflective thinking, and philosophy of religion may be defined as religion's reflection upon its basic insights and basic attitudes, *as radical self-understanding of religion in terms of its own spirit.* It is an effort at self-clarification and self-examination."[35]

Heschel argued that it is necessary to probe religious experience with reason because one's initial flashes of insight lack are unclear and undeveloped. He wrote, "The insights of faith are general, vague, and stand in need of conceptualization in order to be communicated to the mind, integrated and brought to consistency."[36] We therefore emerge with the first two steps of Heschel's methodology for arriving at theology. First one has a religious experience, then one applies reason to these experiences to deduce what one can from them.

B. Torah: Heschel's Key Gateway to Theology

Heschel also offered a different way of probing theological belief, one that he argued is indispensable. Heschel suggested that learning from Torah is an additional and required step for arriving at theology.

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[33] *MNA*, 78
[34] *GSM*, 8
[35] *GSM*, 8
[36] *GSM*, 20

Heschel provided one reason for the importance of Torah as a means for accessing spirituality that may be appealing to contemporary liberal readers. By reading Torah Heschel argued, we can be in conversation with people who lived in different circumstances than us. In *MNA*, Heschel poetically evoked this idea of the Torah as an ongoing conversation: "Many songs, unfathomable today, are the resonance of voices of bygone times. There is a collective memory of God in the human spirit, and it is this memory of which we partake in our faith."[37] Heschel celebrated the wealth of wisdom that is available through the study of Torah: "There is a treasure-house in our group memory."[38]

But Heschel also argued that Torah is an indispensable means for arriving at theology because Torah is the product of revelation. Heschel's conception of Torah as originating in revelation may perhaps be less palatable for contemporary practitioners of liberal religion. In his 1953 essay "The Moment At Sinai," Heschel explained his view of revelation. For him, revelation was an *event* in history, not a *process*.[39] By this Heschel meant that revelation occurred at a specific moment in time that punctuated history. Judaism, for Heschel, was indissolubly linked to the event of revelation and subsequent events in Jewish history. Heschel wrote, "The root of Jewish faith is [...] not a comprehension of abstract principles but an *inner attachment to those events*; to believe is to remember, not merely to accept the truth of a set of dogmas."[40]

Heschel wrote that the revelation is also critical because it is what gives history meaning. Heschel wrote, "Time for the non-prophetic man is the dark destroyer, and history is at bottom meaningless, a monotonous repetition of hatred, bloodshed and armistice."[41] By

[37] *MNA*, 161
[38] *MNA*, 161-162
[39] *MGSA*, Kindle Location 760
[40] *MGSA*, Kindle Location 755
[41] *GSM*, 206

creating a sense of purpose in history, Heschel believed, revelation provides meaning to collective human existence. Heschel wrote that revelation allows human beings to "believe that history as a whole has a meaning that transcends that of its parts."[42] For Heschel, it is because of revelation, this "act of communication,"[43] that human beings are able to make meaning out of time.

While, for Heschel, Torah is the product of revelation, Torah is not the literal word of God. Instead, Heschel wrote, Torah itself is "*midrash*," which suggests that the Torah only approximated the word of God.[44] Heschel therefore argued in various different ways that it is our responsibility as Jews to continue to reinterpret the Torah. Heschel wrote that revelation "was not given by one generation alone. All generations of Israel were present at Sinai. It was an event that happened at a particular time and also one that happened for all time."[45] Because of this Heschel wrote in *HT*: "The giving of the written Torah is the beginning, not the end, of the Torah. When the Holy and Blessed One gave the Torah to Israel, it was given as wheat or flax are given to have flour or garments produced from them."[46] In *GSM*, Heschel described Torah as "a call for *continuous understanding*," suggesting that it is up to Jews in every era to continue to reinterpret it.[47] Marmur explored in depth Heschel's call for the continuous reinterpretation of Torah. Marmur argued that Heschel saw the Jewish corpus as a means through which to understand the world today. Marmur wrote, "For Heschel, the great works of the Jewish canon are not to be understood primarily as reflections of their own time but rather as prisms through which an ancient and always current light is refracted."[48]

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[42] *GSM*, 206
[43] *GSM*, 208
[44] *GSM*, 185
[45] *MGSA*, Kindle Location 810
[46] *HT*, 663
[47] *GSM*, 273
[48] Marmur, 5

Still, even if we accept Heschel's formulation that Torah speaks to us differently at different times and even allows us to better understand our time, Heschel's view on revelation may be unpalatable to many contemporary liberal readers. In one section of *Torah Min HaShamayim*, Heschel laid out this conundrum. Heschel wrote:

> The expression 'The Holy and Blessed One spoke and Moses wrote' is nothing but a way of giving voice to amazement in the face of the hidden and wondrous, and it should be treated as is any phrase the role of which is to ease communication and to bring the mysterious in contact with common sense; that is, its value is dissipated as soon as it is taken literally.[49]

This passage can be read as suggesting that we don't have to take the divine authorship of the Torah literally. Instead, we can see it as a phrase whose role is to "ease communication and to bring the mysterious in contact with common sense." But Heschel went on to write: "The sanctity of Torah lies in its secrets. And a person cannot recognize that sanctity without first understanding that just as mortals can sink to the lowest depths, so can they rise to sublime heights."[50] One is left to conclude that Heschel did not believe that the Torah was the literal word of God as dictated to Moses, but Heschel did hold onto the belief that some mysterious act of revelation occurred. Heschel wanted to hold onto the idea that people can "rise to sublime heights."

At this point, we have arrived at an understanding of how Heschel's two interrelated methods for developing his theology. His first method for establishing his theology was his phenomenology of personal experience and his analysis of this experience. He observed his religious encounters and then deduced what he could conclude from them. His second

[49] *HT*, 667
[50] *HT*, 667

method for arriving at theology was to explore his own belief by analyzing and making arguments about the Jewish corpus of texts.

## 3. Reflection: The Difficulty of Getting Started

A few months ago, I taught a class for adults on the opening section of Heschel's *GSM* at the synagogue where I serve as rabbinic intern. In the opening session of the class, I asked the participants to share an experience of awe. They shared stories of births, breath-taking experiences in nature, quiet times of reflection, incredible coincidences and the minutes before the death of a loved one. Almost all of the twenty five participants described an awe-filled moment in their lives. As a class, it seemed that we could agree that the apprehension of awe is a universal or near-universal human experience.

And yet, as we delved more deeply into *GSM*, many of the participants pushed back on Heschel's assertion that the experience of awe or radical amazement moves one to realize the existence of God. People argued that this was too much of a leap, that there was no evidence to point from awe to God, that it seemed to be a forced conclusion.

It's possible to argue that in the societal context in which the class occurred, there's an understandable reluctance to use "God" language. Because of various factors including secularism and a reaction against religious fundamentalism, there's a reluctance among liberal Jews to describe belief in God.

Heschel didn't mince words when describing the phenomenon of people not making the same connection as he did between awe and the existence of God. In *GSM*, he wrote, "there can be no honest denial of the existence of God. There can only be faith or the honest confession of the inability to believe -- or arrogance."[51] Elsewhere in his work, Heschel went even further, writing, "What is called in the English language an atheist, the language of the Bible calls a *fool*."[52]

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[51] *GSM*, 119
[52] *MGSA,* 365

Heschel seems to be overstepping here. Beyond my recent experience teaching the class on *GSM*, I've met many, many good and honest people who don't make the same connection as Heschel that awe indicates the existence of God. Some of my closest friends and family members simply don't make Heschel's leap of intuiting that awe leads one to realize that the world is an "allusion" to God.[53]

When stated as strongly as Heschel does, this approach of basing theology on personal intuition begets an initial problem of spiritual elitism and even arrogance. Who is Heschel, or anyone for that matter, to claim that their religious experiences are universal and that anyone who doesn't intuit something similar is misguided or diluting themselves?

It therefore seems advisable to temper these assertions of certainty and the inadequacy of those who don't come to similar conclusions. In Heschel's defense, it was possible that Heschel deliberately overstated the case for faith because of his diagnosis that faith was so desperately needed during his era.[54] This reading that Heschel intentionally used hyperbole because of the difficulty of belief in a post-Holocaust era of secularization resonates with me personally -- Heschel's confidence that the experience of awe ought to lead one to belief helped me on my own journey of faith. Would reading *GSM* have had the same influence on me had Heschel offered caveats to his descriptions of awe and religious experience?

Still, the problem of arrogance with respect to the religious lives of others endures in Heschel's writing -- and actually points to an even deeper potential pitfall in Heschel's method. If one is to base one's theology on intuition and super-rational experience, there are few guardrails that prevent one from asserting whatever one wants. Presumably, "intuition"

[53] *GSM*, 39
[54] See Held, 125

could lead one to problematic, nihilistic or even evil conclusions upon which one grounds one's religious beliefs. This is a serious problem, and in analysis Section 8 I will examine how Heschel implemented guardrails to the problem of the potential arbitrariness of his method.

For now, it is worth considering the necessity of pursuing Heschel's method of observing one's own religious experiences. To be blunt: what do we have to go on in developing a theology besides our own spiritual experiences? One should retain the caveats of being humble and open-minded about the implications of what one intuits, and it is advisable to engage with these questions through a religious tradition. Still, we are ultimately trying to understand a domain of human experience that transcends what can be studied through ways of knowing that depend entirely on reason and verifiable knowledge. Instead, religious interrogation calls upon us to pursue a different type of truths -- truths that we can only apprehend through intuition and super-rational thinking, but that are essential to our lives.

# 4. Analysis: The Power of Polarities

## A. Opposite Personalities

We have established the beginning of Heschel's method for developing theology: it began with an observation of his own religious experiences, which he explored through reason and a deep immersion in Jewish texts and tradition. In order to trace the next steps of his theological process -- in order to determine what he found through this method -- we'll begin by looking at how Heschel approached a sentiment he felt in different ways throughout his life: his frustration with the societies that surrounded him. Heschel's frustration had many sources. Held described how Heschel felt a deep religious frustration with God at the condition of the humanity that he expressed in his early works. Held described the poetry Heschel wrote when he was young in which "protest is pervasive, and the poet does not shy away from his own raging voice."[55] One of the biggest sources of frustration for Heschel during his time in the United States was the nature of religious practice generally and also more specifically of Jewish practice in the United States. In the opening paragraph of *GSM*, Heschel forcefully described his exasperation at the Judaism he encountered. "Religion declined not because it was refuted," he wrote, "but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid."[56] Heschel also articulated a general frustration with people's superficial approach to living in the American culture of his time. In an essay in which Heschel explored repentance, he wrote:"The apostasy of the past is matched by the superficiality of today."[57]

As the United States became increasingly secular, as religious practice did not evolve into what Heschel wanted it to be, and as problems of justice remained intractable, Heschel

[55] Held, 189
[56] *GSM*, 3
[57] *MGSA*, Kindle Location 1828

analyzed the life of the Kotzker Rebbe in *PT*. The Kotzker Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Morgensztern of Kotzk, was a Hasidic master who lived in present-day Poland from 1787 to 1859. In Heschel's presentation of him, the Kotzker Rebbe was a misanthrope who was vigorously dedicated to pursuing religious truth. Heschel described the Kotzker Rebbe's commitment to truth as relentless and unsparing: "Truth, taught the Kozker, could be reached only by the utmost freedom. Such freedom meant not to give in to any outside pleasures, not to conform, not to please oneself or anyone else."[58] In a middle section of *PT*, Heschel analyzed the similarities between the Kotzker Rebbe and Kierkegaard. Again Heschel presented the Kotzker Rebbe's insistence on a sorrowful and relentless pursuit of truth: "Both Kierkegaard and the Kotkzer contended that the essence of religion was warfare: a fight against spiritual inertia, indolence, callousness."[59] In the Kotzker Rebbe, who Heschel described as "the Ecclesiastes of his age,"[60] it seems that Heschel was exploring his own profound frustration at the superficiality that surrounds him.

But interestingly -- despite Heschel's affinity for the Kotzker Rebbe's approach -- Heschel didn't fully adopt the Kotzker's position as his own. Instead, Heschel presented the Kotzker Rebbe as being one side of a pole that is in opposition with an earlier Hasidic master, the Baal Shem Tov. While Heschel presented the Kotzker Rebbe as believing that human nature was fundamentally sour and that arriving at anything close to truth entailed a relentless and unforgiving undertaking, the Baal Shem Tov took an optimistic view of human nature. According to Heschel, the Baal Shem Tov believed that religious understanding was always within human reach. Heschel described the very different approaches of the two Hasidic masters to the ability of human beings to be in relationship with God:

[58] *PT*, 11
[59] *PT*, 183
[60] *PT*, 15

> The Baal Shem believed that the gates of sanctity were open. It was easy to be righteous, simple to keep the commandments. The Kotzker proclaimed that a gaping chasm separated man from God; that it was audacious to mention God's name with our profane lips; that one must privy himself thoroughly before undertaking the fulfillment of a commandment.[61]

Heschel further emphasized the Kotzker's dreariness and the difficulty of the life he proposed that one should live. "The Kotzker believed that the self was a cavern of misery and woe," Heschel wrote. "When man looked into himself, he saw darkness and turmoil."[62] On the other hand, the Baal Shem Tov "gave every Jew the benefit of the doubt. He perceived the presence of holiness even in those who went astray."[63]

It is indicative of Heschel's general theological disposition that even in his exploration of the rigorous and difficult path of the Kotzker Rebbe -- a perspective that is close to his heart -- Heschel remained committed to seeing the Kotzker Rebbe as one end of a polarity. Heschel insisted that the Kotzker Rebbe and the Baal Shem Tov offered alternative approaches that are opposites, but that are both viable and worthy of exploration. Heschel wrote quite personally about how he learned over the course of his life from both the Baal Shem Tov's perspective and the Kotzker Rebbe's: "I was taught about inexhaustible mines of meaning by the Baal Shem; from the Kotzker I learned to detect immense mountains of absurdity standing in the way. The one taught me song, the other -- silence."[64]

As Heschel explored this tension between the Kotzker Rebbe and the Baal Shem Tov, Heschel used deliberate language to convey how this tension created a dynamic that was energizing and sustained his inquiry. Heschel wrote, "The Kotzker sought to go beyond the Baal Shem. He succeeded in disclosing the antithesis, the counterpole. Yet he has neither

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[61] *PT*, 17
[62] *PT*, 33
[63] *PT*, 33
[64] *PT*, xiv

refuted nor eclipsed him."[65] Heschel's use of the term "antithesis," which is also the title of the second chapter of *PT* is critical. The concept of dialectics was a fundamental idea in the European philosophy Heschel studied in Germany, most notably articulated by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. In dialectics, one concept creates a thesis, an opposing concept creates an antithesis, and a third concept combines the first two to create a synthesis. For Heschel, the thought of the Kotzker Rebbe and that of the Baal Shem Tov were in dialectical relationship -- they were opposing forces that contradict one another. But importantly for Heschel, these two opposing forces did not cancel themselves out; instead both approaches remained valid and the tension between these opposing forces generated creativity and exploration. Heschel described his experience of being moved by the dialectical opposition between the Kotzker Rebbe and the Baal Shem Tov in personal terms: "I realized that, in being guided by both the Baal Shem Tov and the Kotzker, I had allowed two forces to carry on a struggle with me. One was occasionally mightier than the other. But who was to prevail, which was to be my guide? Both spoke convincingly, and each proved right on one level yet questionable on another."[66] This dialectical tension between the Baal Shem Tov and the Kotzker Rebbe fueled the first half of *PT* -- in these chapters Heschel explored the conflict between the two paradigms of these sages.

Heschel's work is often structured around opposing forces that are in tension with one another. As the contemporary scholar Rabbi Reuven Kimelman explored, Heschel throughout his work was interested in maintaining the distinction between opposing forces in dialectical relationships. Kimelman wrote, "Heschel's theology offers a historical and conceptual framework for maintaining the dialectic without reducing one pole to the other."[67] In a

[65] *PT*, 18
[66] *PT*, xiv
[67] Kimelman, 48

manner similar to the way he places the Baal Shem Tov and the Kotzker Rebbe in opposition to one another, Heschel also explores the tension between two thinkers in *HT*. In this voluminous book originally written in Hebrew, Heschel explored the ways the rabbinic corpus understands Torah and makes sense of the world by presenting two paradigms that are in tension with one another. These are embodied by the figures of Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael. Heschel described Akiva as being inspired to search holy texts for all possible meanings, often by drawing liberally from the context in which these words are used elsewhere in the Bible. Heschel wrote, "Rabbi Akiva held that every detail, and every stylistic form, has a deep meaning and esoteric intent." Heschel also described how Akivan theology includes an immanent God. Heschel wrote, "Rabbi Akiva's entire temperament was upward-directed, and as between heaven and earth, heaven always took precedence."[68] Ishmael, on the other hand, had a much more measured and careful disposition; Heschel wrote that Ishmael was guided by, "Delicacy, intellectual reserve, clear thinking and sobriety. He sought the middle way and his words were carefully measured. His emotional equilibrium and his intellectual sobriety did not allow his feelings to sweep him off into extremism."[69] Ishmael focused on the "surface, plain meaning of the text"[70] and his theological approach was to conceive of a transcendental God who was less accessible to human beings.[71] Heschel imagined how Akiva and Ishmael understood the world given their different theologies: "Rabbi Ishmael would see the world as autonomous, following the course that the transcendent God set for it, Rabbi Akiva would experience every day, every minute, every experience as another miracle and as evidence of the direct flow of divine immanence."[72]

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[68] *HT*, 56
[69] *HT*, 33
[70] *HT*, 32
[71] *HT*, 65
[72] *HT*, 65

Heschel's presentation of Akiva and Ishmael is complicated and does not always map exactly onto the immanent versus transcendent dichotomy. Still, for the purposes of this interrogation, it is important to see that Heschel put these two contrasting schools in contrast with one another, and that he described the value of each of them without favoring one over the other.

In a manner similar to Heschel's exploration of the Kotzker Rebbe and the Baal Shem Tov, Heschel saw Akiva and Ishmael as being in dialectical tension. At times Heschel was poetic[73] in how he described this ongoing dialectic, but at others Heschel explicitly used philosophical language to explain this interplay between the schools of Akiva and Ishmael. He wrote, "Thought develops only through dialectic; through the synthesis of concepts that are opposed to one another and compliment one another."

B. The Diversity of Heschel's Polarities

As Heschel explored these polarities as represented by Ishmael, Akiva, the Baal Shem Tov and the Kotzker Rebbe, Heschel made it clear that his approach of allowing polarities to remain in dialectical opposition can also apply to other key concepts in theology. In *GSM*, Heschel described how *agada* and *halacha*, two central modes of Jewish thinking, are in tension.[74] He argued that the rabbinic mind was characterized by a "contest between receptivity and spontaneity, between halacha and agada. Agada is the expression of man's ceaseless striving which often defies all limitations. Halacha is the rationalization and

[73] Heschel writes toward the end of this book "Jewish thought is nourished from two sources, and it follows two parallel paths; the path of vision and the path of reason." (*HT*, 708)

[74] Heschel begins his discussion of *agada* in *GSM* by referring to how *agada* is often defined negatively as "all the non-legal or non-halachic parts of rabbinic literature." (*GSM*, 324) Heschel also defines *agada* positively as an "almost inexhaustible wealth of religious insight and feeling,"and the means through which "motivations, difficulties, perplexities, and longings, came to immediate and imaginative expression." (*GSM*, 324) Halacha has its conventional meaning in Heschel's thought -- it is the genre of writing that helps to determine how we should act. Heschel summarizes that "agada" is "the art of being" whereas halacha is "the science of deeds." (*GSM*, 310)

schematization of living; it defines, specifies, sets measure and limit, placing life into an exact system."[75] As with the dialectical opposition between the paradigms of Akiva, Ishmael, the Kotzker Rebbe and the Baal Shem Tov, Heschel described how in order for the tension between *halacha* and *agada* to be generative, both *halacha* and *agada* must be appreciated. Heschel summarized this with an image to convey this dialectical dependency that we haven't yet encountered; he wrote that *halacha* and *agada* "can only survive in symbiosis."[76]

In exploring this dialectic between *halacha* and *agada*, Heschel's writing took an interesting turn that is important for our purposes: he made a general statement about the importance of polarities in Judaism. It's worth citing this passage at length to get a sense of how important and varied polarities can be for Heschel. He writes:

> Jewish thinking and living can only be adequately understood in terms of a dialectic pattern, containing opposite magnetic properties. As in a magnet, the ends of which have opposite magnetic qualities, these terms are opposite to one another and exemplify polarity which lies at the very heart of Judaism, the polarity of ideas and events, of mitzvah and sin, of kavanah and deed, of regularity and spontaneity, of uniformity and individuality, of halacha and agada, of law and inwardness, of life and fear, of understanding and obedience, of joy and discipline, of the good and the evil drive, of time and eternity, of this world and the world to come, of revelation and response, of insight and information, of empathy and self-expression, of creed and faith, of the word and that which is beyond words, of man's quest for God and God in Search of Man.[77]

We see that this dynamic of polarity was a driving force in Heschel's theology. It is as if Heschel described Judaism as a tent that stands not only because of one central polarity, but instead a series of different polarities that together hold up the tent.

It is also important to note that there isn't one central polarity that drove all of Heschel's thinking. Yes, there are overlaps between some of these polarities. Both the Baal

[75] *GSM*, 336
[76] *GSM*, 339-340
[77] *GSM*, 341

Shem Tov and Rabbi Akivah, for example, tend to take an approach of a more immanent God; while the Kotzker Rebbe and Rabbi Ishmael tend to understand God to be more transcendent. But there are also distinctions between the Kotzker Rebbe and Rabbi Ishmael, for example. Heschel wrote that the Kotzker Rebbe is a "gadfly,"[78] while Heschel describes Rabbi Ishmael as having "a congenial straightforwardness amenable to all."[79] While there were certainly themes Heschel returned to in his thought such as the polarity between immanent theology and transcendent theology, Heschel presented a varied set of dialectics.

Another important feature of Heschel's use of dialectics is that in almost all cases the two alternatives he proposed in his polarities were equally viable. Despite some readers of Heschel who argue that he favored one side over the other in various dialectics he presented, in general Heschel presented opposing forces in dialectics that were both genuine options. In the two most significant examples we have looked at -- the dialectics between the Baal Shem Tov and the Kotzker Rebbe in *PT*, and the schools of Akivah and Ishmael in *HT* -- Heschel presented opposing alternatives that were both viable. Despite exploring the appeal of all of these alternatives at different points in these two *PT* and *HT*, there is no convincing evidence to show that Heschel in fact favored one side of the opposing approach over the other.[80]

C. Should One Attempt to Reconcile Dialectics?

This work of considering dialectics in Jewish thought and practice leads to a difficult question. If one is to maintain both sides of a dialectic as live options, how are we to act? To take a concrete example, how is one meant to read the Torah if one is learning from both Akiva and Ishmael? Surely one can alternate between interpreting literally and creatively;

[78] *PT*, 88
[79] *HT*, 38
[80] See *PT*, 17 and *HT,* 708

one can choose to sometimes follow Ishmael and sometimes follow Akiva. But is there a middle ground? Is there a way to draw from both Ishmael and Akiva *in the same interpretation*? If we take the textual approaches of Ishmael and Akivah seriously, it seems that it is impossible look at the same time at both the plain meaning of words in their original Scriptual contexts and to think more creatively about the meaning of words based on their meanings elsewhere in the Bible. In this case the project of combining two ends of a dialectic fails.

To use another example: is it possible for God to be both immanent and transcendent at the same time? This stretches the imagination, but it seems more viable than the previous example. Perhaps God could at once be everywhere in the world, always accessible to us; and also above us and beyond anything we can ever understand.

These questions point to the general issue of the role of synthesis in dialectical thought. Isn't the point of dialectics to arrive at *synthesis* -- at some combination of two concepts that are in tension with one another?

At times Heschel did allude to a synthesis of opposing sides of dialectics. In one of his most helpful explorations of this problem in *HT*, he referred to the "two natures coming together"[81] and "the synthesis of concepts that are opposed to one another and compliment one another."[82] Similarly, Held suggested that Heschel believed that a synthesis is sometimes possible. Held wrote, "although in the development of Jewish thought, there are 'pure Akibans' and 'pure Ishmaelians,' there is also a third category, made up of those who hold a more or less uneasy alloy of both positions."[83] At the risk of over-extending this metaphor,

[81] *HT*, 709
[82] *HT*, 708
[83] Held, 192

this image of a "more or less uneasy" "alloy" is useful. An alloy is a mixture of one metal and another substance. The two different materials combine to create something new.

But Held was correct to call this alloy "more or less uneasy." Heschel cautioned that combining two sides of a dialectic is difficult and that it is critical to preserve the integrity of both sides of dialectics. Furthermore, one could say that Heschel embodied the synthesis of dialectics, but I am unable to find in Heschel's writing an example of Heschel creating true synthesis between opposing forces in a dialectic. Instead, Heschel often emphasized the dangers of collapsing dialectics. In *HT*, he used the image of becoming blind in one eye if one gravitates too much to one side of a dialectic.[84] In *PT*, Heschel cautioned against reading God only in one way: "It is precisely the one-sided emphasis upon God's love and mercy that stands in need of a corrective. We must be reminded that God of the Bible is both Judge and Father, severe as well as compassionate."[85]

Since Heschel referred to "synthesis," we have an indication that Heschel believed that it is sometimes possible to combine two sides of a dialectic. But even when it is possible to synthesize, Heschel taught that it is very difficult to maintain the stability of this synthesis. He described the difficulty in maintaining both sides of a dialectic in poignant terms: "To live means to walk perpetually on the edge of a precipice. The human predicament is a state of constant and irresolvable tension between mighty opposites. Piety and prudence, Truth and self-interest, are irreconcilable. Tension and conflict can no more be eliminated from thought than from life."[86] Instead of creating a true synthesis that combines two sides of a dialectic, Heschel's writing seemed to advocate for a perpetual toggling between opposing sides of dialectics.

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[84] *HT*, 708
[85] *PT*, 132
[86] *PT*, 129

In this vein, Heschel's writing included allusions to turning to the two sides of a dialectic at different times. He described his own experience of this in a citation we also looked at previously: "I realized that, in being guided by both the Baal Shem Tov and the Kotzker, I had allowed two forces to carry on a struggle with me. One was occasionally mightier than the other. But who was to prevail, which was to be my guide? Both spoke convincingly, and each proved right on one level yet questionable on another."[87]

Heschel may have believed that true synthesis, the combination of opposing forces of a dialectic, may be possible in some cases. But the more dominant strain in Heschel's writing, as seen through his abundant exploration of unresolved polarities, suggests that Heschel instead favored an ongoing push and pull between either side of a dialectic.

D. Polarities and the 'Super-Rational'

As we have seen, many of the polarities Heschel explored were mutually exclusive. In the example of Akivah and Ishmael's approaches to reading the Torah, it is logically impossible to apply both methods at the same time; one can read the Torah hyper-literally and one can read the Torah with a loosely associative approach, but one cannot both at the same time. The same dynamic of being mutually exclusive applies to the spiritual approaches of the Kotzker Rebbe and the Baal Shem Tov. Since it isn't rationally possible for the mutually exclusive positions in the polarities he explored to both be true, Heschel's tendency to leave polarities unresolved can be seen as one of the means through which he arrived at the "super-rational." The practice of letting polarities stand as polarities suggests that there is some composite truth that is greater than what can be understood through strict reason alone.

[87] *PT*, xiv

These unresolved polarities are an important characteristic of Heschel's thought in themselves, and they also offer insight into what Heschel meant by the "super-rational." Each alternative within the polarities Heschel explored had its own logic. To return to our most developed examples, Akiva and Ishmael both had internally consistent approaches to reading the Torah, and the Kotzker Rebbe and the Baal Shem Tov both had coherent theological approaches. In this way, Heschel's theology values the interior logic of these approaches. Still, the sum total of these unresolved polarities amounts to something that is beyond reason. This offers insight into why in two of the three places in which Heschel referred to the "super-rational" in *GSM*, Heschel put the "super-rational" in contrast with the "sub-rational."[88] Rather than totally rejecting reason and being "sub-rational," the super-rational incorporates reason, but goes beyond it. In the case of Heschel's use of contrasting theological outlooks that are logically coherent in themselves but in contrast with one another, we see that Heschel valued the rationality of each of these systems on their own, and also believed that they contributed to a composite truth that goes beyond strict reason.

[88] *GSM,* 18 and 103

# 5: Reflection: The Importance of Binary Opposition

Heschel's approach of leaving polarities unresolved opens the door to a generative approach to theological exploration. If one is open to multiple possibilities, one can pick up a greater spectrum of possible religious experiences. As I've learned about this approach -- as I've given myself permission to hold theological views that don't always make coherent sense together -- I've experienced an opening to more ways of experiencing religious life.

Leaving oneself open to greater theological possibility may sound self-indulgent, but I don't believe it has to be. As I've gone through rabbinical training, one of the central areas of theology that has opened to me has been the power of the encounter between two people. Opening myself up to what Martin Buber described as an I-You relationship[89] has enabled me to become a better pastoral care giver. Having a more open theological approach could also open oneself up to better appreciate one's obligation to others. By leaving theological tensions unresolved, one can enrich one's religious inquiry and do things like becoming more aware of one's obligation to others.

And yet, as I've reflected on the central role polarities play in Heschel's theology, I've wondered if Heschel's insistence on polarities could in some ways limit theological inquiry. When I consider my life experience, it doesn't seem as though theological alternatives always present themselves in pairs. Instead, sometimes three, four or more alternatives present themselves. In this way, could thinking in terms of binaries inhibit religious interrogation? For example, there are many different ways one could conceive of God. One could think of God in terms of the awe and radical amazement Heschel described in the first third of *GSM*. Or God could exist in our relationships with other people and

[89] See Buber, 56-57

entities. God could also be that which helps us to overcome difficulty. God could be beyond anything we could ever understand. Or God could be everywhere and everything. The world generally is not composed exclusively of binary options. So why is it that Heschel returned again and again to putting two concepts in tension with one another?

Perhaps this is a deficiency in Heschel's approach. There are many examples of people offering theological alternatives that come in more than two options. The system of theological multiplicity in the Jewish tradition that has most resonated with people is the system of kabbalistic *sefirot*, or divine emanations. In this system, there are ten divine *sefirot* that work in complex and dynamic interplay with one another. As Green described, "the *sefirot* may be viewed not as hypostatic 'entities,' but as *symbolic clusters*, linked by association, the mention or textual occurrence of any of which automatically brings to mind all the others as well."[90] Interestingly, the system of *sefirot* includes the type of binary tensions that Heschel valued (for example the *sephira* of "*gevurah*" or "power" is put in tension with the *sephira* of "*chesed*" or "love)."[91] But the system of *sefirot* also allows for the interplay of more than two elements in the sophisticated and loose way Green described. This exemplifies a way of engaging in theology that goes beyond binary thinking.

It is important to note that, as we have seen, Heschel's system of polarities allows for many different types of polarities that interact with one another in his sum total of his theological exploration. Still, Heschel returned again and again to putting two elements in opposition with one another, rather than considering three, four or more options at once.

Although there are limits to this approach of considering precisely two entities in tension, it seems worthwhile to also consider the value of this method. Heschel's explorations

[90] Green 2004, 56
[91] See Green 2004, ix

of these polarities demonstrated that there is an inherent generative power in putting two concepts or schools of thought in opposition with one another. In a pursuit for super-rational truth, it seems there is an energy that comes from binary opposition that can fuel an ongoing inquiry -- and perhaps this energy is more diffuse when three or four elements in conversation with one another. I am therefore left thinking that theological exploration often does work in multiplicities greater than two, but that one also shouldn't dismiss the power of considering two sides of a dynamic in opposition with one another. As Heschel demonstrated throughout his work, there is a creative power that comes with forces in binary tension.

# 6: Analysis: Inconsistency and Paradox

## A. Not a Physics Paper

If you squeeze a plum too tightly, it will come apart in your fingers. There seems to be a similar phenomenon when it comes to analyzing the logical consistency of Heschel's writing. In part because of Heschel's desire to move his readers emotionally or perhaps even viscerally, Heschel writing can be characterized by a looseness of association. Heschel uses metaphor,[92] allegory[93] and hyperbole,[94] and the key terms in his thought are sometimes used inconsistently.[95] If one attempts to squeeze consistent meaning out of every sentence in Heschel's *oeuvre*, one will find logical discrepancies.

An example of a reader who pressed Heschel's writing to try to see if it would conform to an unimpeachable standard of logical rigor is Meir Ben-Horin. A contemporary of Heschel's, Ben-Horin was a Prussian-born Jewish academic who emigrated to the United States and prized rationalistic thinking and the work of Rabbi Moredechai Kaplan.[96] In a series of essays written during Heschel's lifetime, Ben-Horin excoriated Heschel for embracing irrationality, mysticism and mystery at the expense of rational thought. Ben-Horin was not a charitable reader of Heschel. He accused Heschel's work of "cleaving to vacuity"[97]

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[92] Heschel uses metaphor frequently (and perhaps at times overly-extends his metaphors). A notable example of his use of metaphor occurs at the end of his essay "The Moment at Sinai" in which he argues that time can be conceived of as a "circle." (*MASG*, Kindle location 848)

[93] Heschel also uses allegory quite frequently. For an example that is relevant to this overall inquiry, see Heschel's exploration of seeing out of both eyes as a metaphor for being open to multiple sides of polarities in *HT* pp. 708-710.

[94] As Held contends, Heschel sometimes "pulls out all the rhetorical stops" to cajole his readers into accepting the importance of faith in their era.

[95] In *GSM*, it is difficult to distinguish the firm boundaries between the concepts of "awe," "wonder," "radical amazement" and the "sublime." These terms are sometimes used synonymously and at other times they seem to have slightly different meanings.

[96] Encyclopedia Judaica, "Meir Ben-Horin"

[97] Ben-Horin, "Review," 253

and had nothing positive to say about Heschel's writing. Ben-Horin's disdain for Heschel coheres with Ben-Horin's broader critique against an embrace of the mystical that Ben-Horin identified in his intellectual milieu.[98]

Still, precisely because Ben-Horin wanted to apply such exacting analysis to Heschel's thought, Ben-Horin's reading of Heschel's inconsistencies is useful because it lays bare Heschel's periodic looseness of association. For example, Ben-Horin faulted Heschel for contradictions in Heschel's appraisal of the human ability to understand "ultimate meaning." Ben-Horin wrote, quoting from Heschel's *GSM*:

> *Logical contradiction* thrives on the soil of vacuity. The following examples are chosen at random: "We are unable to attain insight into the ultimate meaning and purpose of things" (p. 54). "Inaccessible to us are the insights into the nature of ultimate reality" (p. 58). "To the Jewish mind the ultimate enigmas remain inscrutable" (p. 62). Yet it is beyond question that ultimately all things are allusions to "a meaning greater than themselves" (p. 39), that—contrary to Maimonides— "ultimate reality" comes to expression in events rather than in ideas (p. 21). Reason for "ultimate rejoicing" resides in the certainty that there is meaning beyond the mystery (p. 66), that the mystery is not the ultimate, that the ultimate is not a law but a judge, not a power but a father (p. 68), not fate but God (p. 211).

As Ben-Horin demonstrated in this excerpt, if one reads Heschel narrowly it seems that there are logical contradictions around humanity's ability to ascertain "ultimate purpose." At times Heschel wrote that the nature of ultimate reality is "inaccessible to us;" at others Heschel attributed meaning to this concept, calling it, for example, a "father" or "God." However, if one reads the examples Ben-Horin provided in which Heschel defined "ultimate meaning," there remains an ambiguity to these terms. Heschel described how this mysterious or ineffable power is an allusion to something greater -- Heschel offered hints of what this

[98] See, for example, Ben-Horin's broader critique of Fackenheim, Gaster, Buber and Niebhur in his 1960 essay "The Ultimate and the Mystery."

power could mean, but he didn't fully define the nature of "ultimate reality." The terms Ben-Horin cited to expose Heschel's alleged contradictions all remain vague (these are "a meaning greater than ourselves," "expression in events," "the ultimate rejoicing," "judge," "father" and "God"). When read in context, this example brought by Ben-Horin therefore doesn't succeed. Even if Heschel wasn't always exacting in his language, Heschel's work remained logical with respect to the question of "ultimate meaning."

It seems that Ben-Horin's fundamental objection to Heschel's thought lied in this dispute over the role of mystery and the ineffable. In his theology, Heschel sought to describe a complicated situation: according to Heschel, the ineffable is an allusion to something greater than us,[99] but the ineffable remains fundamentally beyond our comprehension. According to Heschel, we can't understand the ineffable, but we can sense that it refers to something greater than us. There ultimately isn't a logical contradiction in this dynamic; it is conceivable that an entity is beyond our comprehension, but we can understand some of the effects of its existence. In this case and in others, Ben-Horin did not succeed in identifying serious inconsistencies in Heschel's work.

Ben-Horin's identification of potential contradictions in Heschel's work did nevertheless provide a useful vehicle through which to explore the style or register in which Heschel writes. As Ben-Horin demonstrated, one can take sentences out of context and find that Heschel appeared to define terms inconsistently. This occasional inconsistency is indicative of Heschel's priorities as a theological thinker: Heschel sacrificed being exacting in his terminology for the evocative power of his writing. In the case of the knowability of "ultimate meaning," it would have been conceivable for Heschel to more fully explain at

[99] See, for example, *GSM*, p. 107.

certain points the dynamic of something fundamentally unknowable still having perceivable characteristics, but this would have made for much clunkier sentences.

More generally, Heschel sought to convince his readers by appealing to them on a visceral level rather than trying to persuade his readers through the unimpeachable logic of a physics paper. Marmur wrote, "In my reading, Heschel's thought is more suggestive than explicit. To use a Heschelian distinction, trawling Heschel's work for the kind of 'strict logical arrangement' he associated with the Sephardi tradition would be a futile exercise. His work is better characterized by the 'inner wrestling and a kind of baroque emotion' typical of Ashkenazi writers.[100] Heschel provided a model for a style of theological writing that does not always stand the test of ironclad logical examination, but that seeks evocatively to sway a reader.

## B. A Deeper Truth Through Contradiction

Even if Ben-Horin overstated the extent to which Heschel's work is self-contradictory, Ben-Horin was correct to identify that there are significant tensions in Heschel's writing that border on contradiction. One of the effects of Heschel's use of polarities, which I analyzed in Chapter 4, is that Heschel left his readers with a theological outlook that contains conflicting possibilities. For example, the sub-section from *HT* "One Who is Blind In One Eye Is Exempt from the Pilgrimage" leaves us with a set of theological statements that are difficult or perhaps even impossible to contemplate rationally. This subsection contains sentences such as: "God is both immanent and transcendent."[101]

[100] Marmur, 7
[101] *HT,* 710

In general, one could read this and the other contrasting statements in this subsection in *HT* as presenting paradoxes that can be logically resolved. However, a more convincing reading seems to be that Heschel was deliberately presenting contradictory statements that only make sense in the context of a super-rational way of knowing that that transcends strict reason. The evidence for this reading resides first in the litany of at least surface-level contradictory statements Heschel presents. Heschel's long list of contradictory statements evokes the subsection in *GSM* in which he named many polarities in Judaism.[102] Since there is no one rational explanation that could resolve all of these statements in tension, the implication seems to be that one should let these tensions stand. In both cases, this lengthy set of statements in tension allow Heschel to emphasize the dynamic of a deeper truth that, rather than being explained through the rational explanation of resolved paradox, ought to remain unresolved.

Further evidence for viewing these statements in tension not as paradoxes but instead as unresolvable contradictions can be found in Heschel's description of the composite truth that these contradictions create. Heschel's use of the image of one who is "blind in one eye" being "exempt from the pilgrimage" suggests that Heschel believed that to apprehend profound truths, one has to hold onto conflicting perspectives at the same time -- one has to see with both eyes.[103] In another example, Heschel wrote, "The nation has two contenances, which reflect two domains that are one."[104] Heschel's evocation of the "one"-ness of these two domains indicates that he believed that even if contrasting statements remain in tension, they create a total composite truth that transcends what can be understood through reason alone.

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[102] See *GSM*, 341
[103] *HT*, 708
[104] *HT,* 710

Heschel used the example of the discrepancy between the Exodus version and the Deuteronomy version of the fourth of the Ten Commandments to illustrate this dynamic of super-rational truth making conflicting statements possible. Exodus commands that Jews "Remember" ("*zakhor"*)[105] Shabbat, while Deuteronomy orders Jews to "keep" or "observe" ("*shamor*")[106] Shabbat. As Tucker explained in a footnote to this subsection, "The classical application of this phrase is meant to unite the performative and prohibitive aspects of Shabbat observance into a unitary whole."[107] In this subsection, Heschel used this well-known example from the Jewish legal tradition to illustrate the broader dynamic of two sides of a polarity both being true and creating a composite truth. In this example, both the "*zachor*" of Exodus and the "*shamor*" of Deuteronomy are legitimate and they come together in the Torah to create a blended truth.

Instead of seeking to resolve apparent paradoxes, Heschel advocated for allowing contradictions to stand. In doing so, Heschel aspired to capture a truth that is super-rational, that extends beyond what can be explained with reason alone.

## C. A Case Study: God's 'Omnipotence' in Heschel's Writing

In Ben-Horin's wide-ranging indictment of Heschel's writing, he discussed one inconsistency in particular that warrants deeper interrogation. Ben-Horin described Heschel's inconsistency around the question of God's omnipotence. Ben-Horin complained that sometimes Heschel depicted an omnipotent God and other times he depicted a powerless God. Ben-Horin wrote: "The unpredictable spur-of-the-moment, parsimonious blasts of grants, mercy, love, interest, choice, justice are enveloped in long, loathsome, *lean*

[105] Deuteronomy 5:12
[106] Exodus 20:8
[107] *HT*, 708, footnote 21

*inter-moments* which are governed by an economy of grace-scarcity, produced by either omnipotence or omn*im*potence."[108] It is worth looking more thoroughly into the question of God's omnipotence in Heschel's writing as an example that allows us to more broadly explore the extent to which Heschel's theology is consistent.

Throughout his writing, Heschel described a dynamic in which an omnipotent God created the world, and decided voluntarily to self-limit God's own power through the creation of humanity. In *MNA*, Heschel described God's need for humanity (which he refers to as "man") as a "self-imposed concern. God is now in need of man because He [God] freely made him a partner in his enterprise, 'a partner in the work of creation'"[109] In a similar vein in *GSM,* Heschel referred to God's "restrained omnipotence"[110] and he described an omnipotence that "is not always perceptible."[111] Various scholars of Heschel including John Merkle have argued in support of this reading that Heschel believed in a decidedly "monotheistic" God, meaning that Heschel's God was transcendent and maintained omnipotence.[112]

However, other scholars of Heschel including Alexander Even-Chen have pointed to one citation in particular to argue that Heschel didn't in fact believe in God's omnipotence. In a talk to a group of educators in 1968 Heschel said:

> The whole conception of God's omnipotence, I suspect, was taken over from Islam. God is almighty, and powerful. Man has nothing to say and nothing to do except to keep quiet and to accept. But, actually, God needs man's cooperation. There will be no redemption without the cooperation of man. Omnipotence as such will not work. [...] I tell you that the idea of divine omnipotence, meaning, holding God responsible for everything,

[108] Ben-Horin,"The Ultimate and the Mystery," 143
[109] *MNA*, 243
[110] *GSM*, 358
[111] *GSM*, 171
[112] Merkle, 28

> expecting Him to the impossible, to defy human freedom, is a non-Jewish idea."[113]

Held provided a close reading of Heschel's talk and made a distinction between what Heschel said God is *able* to do and what Heschel said God is *willing* to do. Held wrote that in general in this talk "it seems that [Heschel] is talking about a decision God has made, not an inherent limitation that He [God] faces."[114] This close reading of Heschel's intention coheres with the dynamic examined above of Heschel's depiction of a voluntarily self-limiting God. Furthermore, within the context of believing that this dynamic of self-limitation took place, it's conceivable that Heschel was again speaking in a shorthand in the often quoted sentence "the whole conception of God's omnipotence [...] was taken from Islam." Instead of fully explaining his belief in God's voluntary self-limitation, Heschel described the end-result of this dynamic (that God's omnipotence was self-limited) as part of his broader critique of Maimonides' belief in an omnipotent God, which Heschel argued Maimonides inherited from Muslim thought. It doesn't therefore seem as though there is a contradiction in Heschel's appraisal of God's power; Heschel's approach of God's voluntary self-limitations remained consistent throughout his work.

We are therefore left with what can be termed Heschel's "theodicy." A theodicy is a rationalization of how an omnipotent and benevolent God could exist at the same time as evil and unjust suffering occurs in the world. Heschel offered his own theodicy by arguing that God is omnipotent and chooses to self-limit Godself.

## D. The Emotional Effect of Heschel's Theodicy

[113] *MGSA,* Kindle Location 3540
[114] Held, 12

Before considering the effect of Heschel's theodicy, it is important to say there is no reason to doubt that Heschel was sincere in his belief that an all-powerful God created the world and then voluntarily chose to limit God's power. Regardless of the benefits of this belief for the construction of a theology that is at once rational and affectively resonate, it is appropriate to honor that Heschel was likely straightforward about his belief. Moreover, Heschel's view of God's voluntary self-limitation is consistent with major tendencies in Jewish theology, including the kabbalistic doctrine of God's "*tzimzum*" or contraction following the creation of the universe. Still, for the sake of this inquiry into Heschel's use of reason and consistency in developing a theology, it is worth considering the effects of this belief.

Heschel's theodicy benefits the construction of Heschel's overall theology for two main reasons. First it allows Heschel's theology to remain logically consistent. Because of this theodicy, there is a rational explanation for how the God Heschel described is both an all-powerful creator and not responsible for evil in the world. This theological approach also allows Heschel's theology to benefit from both the affective result of having a powerful God who can redeem the world and a God who can suffer with humanity and experience what Heschel called "divine pathos."

The advantages of depicting a God with the dual emotional valences of both an all-powerful God and a God capable of suffering are most clearly seen in Heschel's *The Prophets.* In *The Prophets,* Heschel at times emphasized that he was not describing an omnipotent divinity. In fact, Heschel did this by again contrasting what he believed is the God of the Hebrew Bible (which he terms here the "God of pathos") with the God of Islam. Heschel wrote:

> The God of pathos may be contrasted with the God of Islam. For all the belief in divine mercy, Allah is essentially thought of as unqualified Omnipotence, Whose will is absolute, not conditioned by anything man may do. He acts without regard for the specific situation of man. Since everything is determined by Him, it is a monologue that obtains between Allah and man, rather than a dialogue or a mutuality as in the biblical view. [...]
>
> The power of God is not the ultimate object in the prophet's experience of the divine, nor the utter remoteness and inscrutability of the numinous-the supremely exalted-but the divine Mind whose object of attention is man and whose pathetic reactions reveal man as cause. Spirit, not power, is the ultimate reality for the prophetic consciousness. [115]

In this passage, Heschel described both the extent to which the God of his theology isn't all-powerful and he also offered evocative language for the benefits of a God of "spirit" with a "divine Mind whose object of attention is man."

However, at other points in the *The Prophets*, Heschel's theology reaps the benefits of an all-powerful God. We see this especially in Heschel's description of God's capacity to usher in the messianic age and redeem the world. Heschel described the prophets' resolute belief in this redemption in stirring terms:

> Together with condemnation, the prophets offer a promise. The heart of stone will be taken away, a heart of flesh will be given instead (Ezek. 1 1:19). Even the nature of the beasts will change to match the glory of the age. The end of days will be the end of fear, the end of war; idolatry will disappear, knowledge of God will prevail. The inner history of Israel is a history of waiting for God, of waiting for His arrival.[116]

This excerpt shows the extent to which Heschel's theology also allows for a powerful God whose eventual intervention into worldly affairs offers a source of hope and encouragement for humanity. It is important to note that Heschel doesn't clearly lay out how it is possible for a God of pathos (ie. a God who isn't all-powerful) to someday retain power and intervene in

[115] *Prophets,* 311
[116] *Prophets*, 231

the world. One can come up with a rational explanation that would either argue that God retained some power or human activity could restore God's power, but in his descriptions of messianic redemptions, Heschel did not explain how his theology overcame this potential self-contradiction.

Because of Heschel's theodicy, these two sides of God -- that of divine pathos and that of redemption -- are not logically contradictory. But for the purposes of this inquiry it is important to note that Heschel's descriptions of God contain elements that on a surface level seem to be contradictory. Even if there is a rational explanation for how these characteristics of God can coexist, Heschel's theology offers an example of how contrasting concepts can co-exist in a single theological system. In this example of the question of God's omnipotence, Heschel at times offered an explanation for how this could be, but he didn't dwell on a rational explanation for the co-existence of these contrasting divine attributes. For Heschel, the emphasis is on the emotional resonance of divine pathos and divine redemption, not on a logical explanation for how these phenomena can co-exist. Even if Heschel's theodicy provides rational cover for this potential inconsistency regarding God's power, Heschel's emphasis shows that he was focused on a type of theological exploration that transcends reason.

## 7. Reflection: Is Rational Explanation Necessary?

In the previous section I argued that in his quest for a type of truth that transcends reason, Heschel was sometimes explicit about letting contradictions stand (such as in the sub-section from *HT* "One Who is Blind In One Eye Is Exempt from the Pilgrimage"). And yet, at other times Heschel provided a rational basis for how an apparent contradiction can in fact be a paradox with a rational explanation (such as through his theodicy). As we have seen, Heschel also allowed polarities to stand and he wrote extensively about the importance of maintaining contrasting perspectives.

Still, the broad emphasis in Heschel's writing was not to emphasize or celebrate the moments of logical incongruency in his theology. Logical inconsistency is a component of Heschel's theology, but in Heschel's work, he does not bring attention to it. For example, I have argued that the term "super-rational" is important in Heschel's writing for explaining his methodology, but it is noteworthy that he only used it three times in *GSM*.[117] If Heschel wanted to draw attention to the important work the "super-rational" does in his theological method, he could have used this term more or otherwise drawn more attention to the logical inconsistencies he seems to have believed were so important to theological exploration. In fact in *PT*, Heschel wrote about the dangers of embracing irrationality, "we occasionally come upon the tendency in contemporary philosophy and theology to regard the irrational as the ultimate principle of all things. This is totally alien to Judaism."[118] Since in his quest for super-rational truth, Heschel at times gravitated toward theological truths that defy reason, it is worth interrogating why he chose to reject overt irrationality and why he chose not to emphasize the super-rational nature of his exploration.

[117] See *GSM*, 18, 103 and 105.
[118] *PT*, 194

Perhaps Heschel chose not to emphasize the irrational in his theology because it can lead to people asserting arbitrary and perhaps even noxious beliefs. As we have seen, Heschel valued exploring theological truths through the prism of the Jewish tradition and through reason as applied to this tradition. While it seems that Heschel recognized the value of super-rational religious exploration, it seems he saw the danger in totally rejecting reason and he saw the value in maintaining an adherence to a religious tradition.

It therefore seems wise to follow Heschel's lead: yes in a quest for super-rational religious experience it is sometimes necessary to dispense with strict rationalism. But one should be cautious about the extent to which one embraces irrationality. An image emerges in my mind of holding reason gently. One doesn't want to completely dispense with reason and unmoor oneself with a full-throated embrace of irrationality. Instead, reason offers a useful touchstone in theological exploration, but, as Heschel demonstrated through his tendency to allow polarities to remain unresolved and his at times inconsistent theology, reason doesn't get the final say.

Perhaps it is for this reason that Heschel's theology includes implicit safeguards that mitigate the potential pitfalls of irrationality. We will now examine those safeguards.

# 8. Analysis: How Does One Know A Theology is Correct?

As we have seen, Heschel's reliance on the super-rational poses a significant problem. How do we know that our institutions are correct? Can't we intuit anything we want?

Heschel himself was aware of this problem. He wrote, "It is tragically true that we are often wrong about God, believing in that which is not God, in a counterfeit ideal, in a dream, in a cosmic force, in our own father, in our own selves."[119] Super-rational thinking can also lead us dangerously astray.

Heschel also offered a robust response to this problem. I can identify three responses in his writing to this to the problem of being led astray by an inquiry into the super-rational: he offered tradition as a corrective to our individual mistakes; he showed that dialectical thinking can help limit the possibility that we are misguided; and he advocated for a general stance of theological humility (even if he doesn't always succeed in this humility himself).

## A. Tradition

Toward the middle of *MNA*, Heschel described in dramatic terms the risks inherent in making a theological mistake because one has based one's beliefs off of intuition. Heschel worried that we can be so led astray by our intuitions as to worship the devil. He wrote, "How much tender devotion, heroism and self-mortification have been lavished upon the devil? How often has man deified Satan, found the evil magnificent though dismal, and full of indescribable majesty?"[120]

Tellingly, Heschel's subsequent section described the importance of being part of a faith tradition. Heschel wrote, "Not the individual man, nor a single generation by its own

[119] *MNA*, 160
[120] *MNA*, 160

power, can erect the bridge that leads to God. Faith is the achievement of ages, an effort accumulated over centuries."[121] The implication of following this passage on errors in faith with this reflection on the importance of engaging with a religious tradition is that being part of a religious tradition can serve as a corrective to the whims and errors of individual intuition. But Heschel didn't mean this in what in our times we might call a fundamentalist way; he was *not* saying that religious tradition offers a corrective to errors in faith because it tells us exactly what to believe.

Instead, Heschel depicted Judaism as offering a corrective to erroneous religious belief through ongoing engagement with that tradition -- which includes continuing to think critically about that tradition. Heschel wrote, "To have faith does not mean, however, to dwell in the shadow of old ideas conceived by prophets and sages, to live off an inherited estate of doctrines and dogmas. In the realm of spirit only he who is a pioneer is able to be an heir."[122] This dynamic plays back into the conception of Torah as renewing itself while also being rooted in the past, which we examined in Section 2: it is by engaging in the ongoing process of Torah that we can at once draw on tradition, which can serve as a corrective to our intuition, while also applying our own capacities for reason and for direct relationship with God.

### B. Dialectical Thinking

Although Heschel is less explicit about making a link between dialectical thinking and the problem of intuiting incorrectly, Heschel's insistence on the power of dialectics can also serve as a corrective to coming to the wrong conclusions based on intuition. As we saw in Section 3, Heschel presented dialectics as being unstable. He cautioned that is difficult to

[121] *MNA*, 161
[122] *MNA*, 164

find a durable equilibrium between opposing forces in a dialectic,[123] and he offered few if any examples of successfully synthesizing two opposing forces in a dialectic. This instability produced a dynamism that seems to offer a corrective to theological mistakes and rigidity.

In *PT*, for example, as Heschel described his oscillation between the approach of the Baal Shem Tov and that of the Kotzker Rebbe, one gets the sense that if Heschel had wholesale adopted one of their positions, he would have become overly rigid in his thinking and he would have perhaps even arrived at incorrect theological opinions. This is exemplified by one section in which Heschel described the effects the Baal Shem Tov and the Kotzker had on him:

> The Baal Shem believed that the gates of sanctity were open. It was easy to be righteous, simple to keep the commandments. The Kotzker proclaimed that a gaping chasm separated man from God; that it was audacious to mention God's name with our profane lips; that one must privy himself thoroughly before undertaking the fulfillment of a commandment.[124]

If we take these claims one at a time, we can see that by devoting himself entirely to either side of the dialectic, Heschel would be led astray. For example, if he believed inflexibly that the "gates of sanctity were open," Heschel's theology would have been incorrect, according to his message gleaned from the Kotzker Rebbe that "a chasm separated man from God." In this way, Heschel's use of dialectics as a key tool for exploring theology leaves him with a nimble approach to arriving at a set of religious beliefs.

Heschel's writing also offered examples of how dialectical thinking can help one avoid theological traps even when Heschel views both sides of the dialectic negatively. Tucker explored how Heschel does this by expanding on a story found in Mishna Bava Metzia. The Mishna presents the story of how two people are holding a *talit* and both claim

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[123] *GSM*, 341
[124] *PT*, 17

ownership of it.[125] In the introduction to the second volume of *TMHS,* Heschel applied the "*kefarin*" and the *"nehargan*" to the two men holding the *talit*.[126] Tucker translated these two terms as "strict and austere," which is in opposition to "cynical and argumentative."[127] Tucker argued that through these two archetypes, Heschel personified those who claim to be certain about everything and those who doubt everything.[128] As Tucker described it, Heschel thought that neither extreme is viable. Tucker wrote, "There are dangers to the health of the tradition from two sides -- those who pretend to certainty and those who conclude that the futile quest for certainty casts fatal doubt on the very meaningfulness of faith."[129] Rather than seeing in this dialectic two viable options, Heschel presented us with two flawed alternatives. Presumably what is called for an oscillation between the two. This example shows that even when both sides of a tension are problematic, Heschel believed that being in a dialectical relationship with them can bear fruit.

### C. Humility

The third element in Heschel's thought that can allow one to avoid the pitfall of coming to incorrect theological conclusions is his humility. This humility begins with the extent to which Heschel believed that the divine is "mysterious" or "ineffable." Often in his writing, Heschel returned to the idea that the experiences of awe or radical amazement that make us aware of the existence of God are shrouded in mystery or are inexpressible. In *GSM,* Heschel wrote, "In using the term mystery we do not mean any particular esoteric quality that may be revealed to the initiated, but the essential mystery of all being as being, and therefore,

[125] Mishna Bava Metzia 1:1. The Mishna offers the halakhic ruling that the *talit* should be divided equally if both parties claim to own at least half of it, while if one party claims to own the whole *talit* and the other party claims to own only half of it, the person who claims the whole *talit* should receive three fourths of it.
[126] *TMHS*, 409
[127] *HT*, xxx [Roman numeral 30]
[128] Tucker, 133
[129] Tucker 133

something which stands beyond the scope of human comprehension."[130] Heschel repeated often this idea that at the heart of his theology lies something that is beyond our comprehension and cannot be expressed in words. To be clear, a key dynamic in Heschel's theology is his certainty that God exists. Heschel found the experience of awe and radical amazement to be so powerful that there can be no doubt that God exists. And yet, the God that he knew exists is shrouded in mystery. In one instance, Heschel explained this dynamic this way:

> [O]ur belief in the reality of God is not a case of first possessing an idea and then postulating the ontal counterpart to it; or, to use a Kantian phrase, of first having the idea of a hundred dollars and then claiming to possess them on the basis of the idea. What obtains here is first the actual possession of the dollars and then the attempt to count the sum. There are possibilities of error in counting the notes, but the notes themselves are here.[131]

In this citation we see both Heschel's *certainty* that God exists -- we have the "actual" possession of the dollars -- and also his openness to the possibility of making an error in understanding God, as seen in the possibility of miscounting the notes.

Because of this possibility of "miscounting the notes," Heschel argued that we should remain humble about the theological conclusions that we come to. He wrote in *MNA*, "We must never cease to question our own faith and to ask what God means to us. Is He an alibi for ignorance? The white flag of surrender to the unknown? Is He a pretext for comfort and unwarranted cheer? A device to cheat despondency, fear or despair?"[132] Heschel's humility led him to say that one should often reconsider one's theology; he advocated for continually probing theological conclusions with questions.

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[130] GSM, 57
[131] *MNA*, 84-85
[132] *MNA*, 160

Despite Heschel's humility about the possibility of "miscounting the notes," to extend the metaphor, Heschel was not humble about the possibility that the notes exist. Held cited a section of *GSM* in which Heschel hyperbolized: "The validity and requiredness of awe enjoy a degree of certainty that is not even surpassed by the axiomatic certainty of geometry."[133] As Held pointed out, Heschel characterized the "experience [of awe and radical amazement] so forceful, so utterly compelling, that one cannot legitimately or coherently entertain doubts about."[134] Even though Heschel acknowledged elsewhere that moments of religious insight pass, this still seems to be overstating the certainty of knowledge of God's existence. Instead of providing room for the possibility of doubting the very fact of religious experience, Heschel strived to establish what Held class a "universal subjective certainty"[135] -- Heschel attempted to universalize the experiences of awe and radial amazement that were so important to him. This seems to be an overstep. As Held pointed out later in his book, "One cannot, after all, argue for a purportedly universal, pre-conceptual experience; one can only strive to re-elicit and re-awaken it."[136] Heschel was therefore at his strongest when he was attempting to re-awaken in his readers this sense of the ineffable.[137] He could have been more circumspect about the "certainty"[138] of the fact of religious experience.[139]

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[133] *GSM*, 27
[134] Held, 56
[135] Held, 65
[136] Held, 93
[137] What Held wrote about the first part of *GSM* applies to much of Heschel's writing: "Read as a description-evocation of faith from the inside, part I of *GSM* stands as one of the monuments of twentieth-century religious writing. Read as something else -- as a set of defensible assumptions and unassailable arguments, for example -- it is far less compelling. Heschel was enormously successful at giving language to the theistically tinged experience of wonder and amazement; he was much less successful -- as one must necessarily be -- in attempting to suggest that the very experience of wonder is always already implicitly theistic. Put differently, Heschel was far more skilled at what he in fact did than what he aspired to do." (Held, 66)
[138] *GSM*, 27
[139] As I explored in Section 3, one possible rationale for Heschel's seeming over-confidence in the fact of the existence of God could have been his desire to provide a corrective to the secular era in which he lived.

Although Heschel's approach to theology contains some guardrails against theological error -- tradition, dialectical thinking, and humility in analyzing religious experiences -- perhaps Heschel could have been more humble in the first move of his exploration of religious experience.

## 9: Reflection: Why Pursue Truth?

In *PT*, Heschel described the Kotzker Rebbe's relentless search for truth. Reading *PT*, one gets the sense that Heschel saw the Kotzker Rebbe as staking his entire existence on the pursuit of truth. As we have seen, this quest led the Kotzker Rebbe to retreat from the world and to become a social outcast.[140] It is clear that Heschel at least in part admired the Kotzker Rebbe's pursuit of truth. Even if Heschel described the Kotzker as a "gadfly" who wasn't "a model for imitation"[141] and didn't embrace the full extent of the sacrifices the Kotzker made in his search for truth, Heschel nevertheless wrote admiringly about the Kotzker's pursuit of truth.[142] Toward the end of *PT*, Heschel expressed hope that one day people will take up the Kotzker's call to pursue truth: "The Kotzker is still waiting for his disciples, for individuals who will make explicit in concrete language what he hinted at in subtle suggestion. They will be willing to stake their existence on the worth of spreading his ideas from person to person through generations, guarding them from trivialization or desecration."[143]

If one accepts what we have examined above -- that the pursuit of the highest forms of truth must happen through a difficult and even potentially dangerous pursuit of super-rational knowledge -- it is worth interrogating why one should engage in this challenging endeavor. If pursuing truth is so difficult and one can potentially come to incorrect and even dangerous conclusions, why do it?

One answer to this question is that we ought to pursue truth because the pursuit of truth is an end in itself and that humans have an obligation to engage in this endeavor. The most famous articulation of this sentiment is perhaps Plato's quoting Socrates in *Apology*:

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[140] *PT*, 11
[141] *PT*, 88
[142] *PT,* 296
[143] *PT*, 318

"the unexamined life is not worth living."[144] There is evidence that Heschel similarly saw the quest for truth as a fundamental human imperative. Heschel wrote, "concealing the Truth was necessary in order to make possible man's greatest adventure: to live in search."[145]

Especially when this sentiment is stated in the negative, it seems to me it is easy to recognize its appeal: there is something inherent in not wanting to be fooled, in pursuing truth that seems to be a widely-held end in itself.

But it seems there is a more important reason to pursue truth -- one Heschel also examined in *PT*. As Heschel's exploration of divine pathos exemplified, pursuing theological truths can lead one to realize one's obligation to others, to answer something like a prophetic call to work to improve the condition of humanity.

Heschel even described the importance of the pursuit of truth in terms of preventing human evil. In *PT*, Heschel wrote that the pursuit of truth is in fact the most important response to the problem of evil. Heschel wrote, "What is one of the major roots of evil in our insane world? The answer offered in this book is: mendacity, falsehood, wantonness of words, perversion of heart. Falsehood is a refuge, an asylum for the cruel, the violent, for consummate criminals. What begins in a lie ends in blasphemy."[146]

When I first encountered this description of the stakes of truth in *PT*, I was mystified. I was surprised that he would describe *falsehood* as such an urgent problem. Isn't the human propensity to evil in itself the greatest challenge we face as a collective? To be blunt, was the problem that the Nazis were *incorrect* or was the problem that the Nazis were *evil*?

However, as I've reflected more on Heschel's assertion, I think he is correct about the centrality of the pursuit of truth in relation to the problem of evil. If one takes the pursuit of

[144] Plato, *Apology,* 38a
[145] *PT*, 297
[146] *PT*, 158

truth seriously, one must also take seriously the theological conclusions that humans are worthy of dignity and that justice is worth pursuing. As Heschel's writing exemplified, the point of theology is not idle or abstract speculation. Instead theology ought to lead one off the page into the realms of action and justice. Seen in this light, the pursuit of truth becomes critical.

It seems to me that in contemporary religiously liberal circles, people seldom talk about a pursuit of truth. Instead, people provide a rationale for a life of faith -- to the extent they do -- in terms of living a fulfilling life or in terms of the extent to which religious practice helps them to live ethically virtuous lives. The rationale of living a life of faith to pursue "truth" rarely if ever appears. But perhaps the best rationale for living a religious life is that it responds to fundamental truths. This answers the challenge of the first rationale for exploring truth examined above -- pursuing religious truth allows one to not be fooled, to live an examined life. But beyond this, pursuing a life of truth leads one to realize one's ethical obligations to others in a more robust way. In our contemporary moment, we can learn from Heschel that pursuing theological truth is an urgent and ethically important endeavor.

# 10. Analysis: How to Believe

As Heschel offers us a model for how to approach theology and explore super-rational truth, an important question emerges: to what extent does Heschel believe it's possible to arrive at definitive answers to deep theological questions?

In the dynamism of Heschel's use of polarities and inconsistency in his theological corpus, it seems that Heschel eschewed simple sentences that can explain difficult theological questions such as the challenge of theodicy.

Heschel was in fact explicit about how simple responses to challenging theological questions were inadequate. In his exploration of theodicy in *PT,* Heschel emphatically stated that easy answers will not suffice. He wrote, "if anyone proposed a definitive formulation of the ultimate meaning of the infinite universe, a meaning which our finite mind could fully comprehend, we would reject it as pompous trash."[147]

As we will see in this chapter, Heschel not only rejected easy answers, but also took seriously the difficulty of continuing to believe in the face of challenges such as the human propensity to evil.

Despite his embrace of dynamism and complexity, and his rejection of simple answers, Heschel continued to believe that the fundamental tenets of his theology are true. For example, as we saw in Section 6, Heschel consistently stood by his theodicy that God voluntarily chose to limit God's own power.

As our analysis of Heschel's theological method nears its end, it is worth considering how Heschel maintained his fundamental theological conclusions while also honoring the difficulty and complexity of belief. In order to offer an example of how Heschel continued to

[147] *PT*, 293

believe despite these challenges, we will explore through a close reading one particular chapter of *PT*, "The Kotzker and Job." In this emotionally engaged chapter written toward the end of his life, Heschel wrestled with the problem of theodicy and offered an indication of how he sustained his faith despite the many challenges to belief.

## A. 'The Kotzker and Job'

Heschel began this crucial chapter on Job in *PT* by indicating that in a book ostensibly about the Kotzker Rebbe, he was, especially in this chapter, sharing his personal reflections. The title of this chapter is "The Kotzker and Job," but Heschel included a footnote to the title of the chapter: "This chapter is not an exposition of the Kotzker's views but, rather, an essay on a major problem of faith which is guided by his sayings."[148] We also see an interesting parallel between how Heschel focused this chapter on the end of the Kotzker Rebbe's life[149] while Heschel was also toward the end of his own life -- *PT* was published the year after Heschel died. Heschel set up this chapter by suggesting that he was primarily interested in offering his own reflections rather than the Kotzker Rebbe's, and also by creating an implicit parallelism between himself and the Kotzker toward the end of his life.

In the opening sections of this chapter, Heschel introduced that he will be exploring how the Kotzker Rebbe (and therefore Heschel himself) approached the problem of theodicy. Heschel emphasized how the problems of evil and human suffering weighed heavily on the Kotzker Rebbe. Heschel wrote that the Kotzker "was tormented by the ever-present enigma:

[148] *PT*, 261
[149] *PT*, 263

why did God permit evil in the world?"[150] From the outset, Heschel described the difficulty of the question of theodicy.

Toward the beginning of the chapter, Heschel also underscored how the Kotzker Rebbe challenged God over the problem of evil. Heschel wrote that the Kotzker Rebbe became angry at God, and sought "to protest, to contradict" God.[151] Heschel explored how the Kotzker Rebbe took a few approaches to this protest against God. Heschel summarized: "The Kotzker felt the agony, knew the tragedy, but what was the remedy? There was only one way to survive: to be Holy in challenging God, to pray militantly, to worship heroically and to wait."[152] From the outset of this chapter, Heschel suggested that even when one despairs, one can remain in relationship with God; one can even become angry with God. Heschel encouraged honest and authentic relationship with God, especially in difficult times: "The outcry of anguish certainly adds more to His glory than callousness or even flattery of the God of pathos."[153] Later in the chapter, Heschel argued that this anger and protest against God manifested most strongly in the Kotzker's silence. Heschel wrote, "In Kotzk one did not cry. Even when in pain, one did not weep. 'Silence,' the Kotkzer said, is the greatest cry in the world.'"[154]

Despite how Heschel described the Kotzker Rebbe's silence as a form of protest against God, it is important to consider that there is a fundamental difference between crying out and silence. Silence carries with it connotations of not having a response that can be put into words. In this case, it represents a fundamental limitation on our capacities to articulate a response to the challenge of theodicy. Held identified in this chapter three countervailing

[150] *PT*, 263
[151] *PT*, 265
[152] *PT*, 267
[153] *PT*, 269
[154] *PT*, 281

forces that push the Kotzker Rebbe to silence. Held identified these as "effrontery" (or a lack of respect for God), humanity's epistemological limits, and that humanity lacks the moral credibility to question God.[155] Heschel presented a dynamic in which not only can people challenge God, but as people do this they feel their own inadequacy.

Throughout this chapter, Heschel offered evocative imagery and stories to underscore this difficulty posed by the facts of evil and human inadequacy to come up with a response to it. In one instance, Heschel did this by drawing from a well-known allegory. He described the story of Abraham encountering an abandoned palace and inquiring about where the owner of the palace could be. The palace is described in Hebrew as being a "*birah doleket*," which Heschel explained can be translated either as "a palace of light" or a "palace in flames."[156] Heschel wrote that the Kotzker Rebbe interpreted this to be a "palace in flames," suggesting that the Kotzker Rebbe understood it as an allegory for God's seeming absence as the world burns. Heschel concluded: "'Could it be that this palace has no lord?' This problem tormented Reb Mendl [ie. the Kotzker Rebbe]. He, who never ingratiated himself with anyone and spoke truth to everyone's face, did not delude himself with facile solutions."[157] Heschel illustrated the profundity of the problem of theodicy: at times the world does in fact seem to be a palace aflame with an absent owner and there is no straightforward explanation for why the owner of the palace allows it to continue to burn.

The difficulty of responding to theodicy is also underscored by the composition of this chapter. Overall, it is difficult to follow its logical progression; it is often unclear why one section follows the next. Held, for example, sees it as "the least linear chapter of one his

[155] Held, 176-177
[156] *PT*, 272
[157] *PT*, 273

least linear books."[158] It seems that the difficult structure of this chapter underscores this central theme that it is difficult to come up with a coherent response to theodicy. Perhaps unintentionally, Heschel conveys through the composition of this chapter how hard it is to come up with a response to the problem of evil.

Despite the difficulty of this question of theodicy, Heschel at various points indicated that one response to theodicy is to consider that an explanation is simply beyond what we can understand rationally. In keeping with his interest with the "super-rational" that we have examined throughout this exploration, Heschel wrote that this response to theodicy doesn't contradict what we can know rationally, but that instead it is beyond it. He wrote, "In faith we can accept that there is meaning beyond absurdity, a meaning which is *supra rationem*, above reason, not *contra rationem*, against reason."[159] In the context of this chapter on theodicy, Heschel applied this principle of the super-rational to the problems of evil and suffering. Heschel explained that he held out hope for a response to theodicy that was beyond his understanding. Heschel wrote, "We are not the final arbiter of meaning. What looks absurd within the limits of time may be luminous within the scope of eternity."[160]

Elsewhere in this chapter, Heschel gave indications of how to respond to super-rational answers that transcend what we can understand rationally. Heschel suggested that music can be used to respond to the super-rational. Heschel wrote, "Answers to the ultimate perplexity cannot be expressed in words. Response is facilitated by song."[161] But the most significant super-rational response Heschel offered was to respond through one's actions. Heschel explored this idea most vividly through a lengthy parable. In the last section

[158] Held, 176
[159] *PT*, 288
[160] *PT*, 301
[161] *PT*, 281

of the tale, a king ordered his workers to fill barrels with water, but these barrels had holes in them and so the water spilled out and it was impossible to fill the barrels.[162] Despite the other workers remarking at the futility of what they are doing, one of the workers exclaims, "'Surely I am to be paid for every barrel! I shall fill them; for this clearly means that my obedience is important to the king.'"[163] Heschel related the Kotzker Rebbe's reading of this part of the parable: "The [...] man was wise indeed. He saw no goal. Pouring water into a barrel full of holes seemed to make no sense. So he explained to the other workers that the object was not the barrels; it was to fulfill the king's desire."[164] For the Kotzker Rebbe as presented by Heschel, it is important to fulfill the king (or God)'s desire by doing what the king wants one to do. Through the Kotzker Rebbe's interpretation of the parable, Heschel communicated that even when one can't find a rational explanation for one's theology, one can continue to find meaning by acting according to what one interprets God to want from us. Heschel wrote, "All searching for rational meaning must yield to the reality upon which Judaism is built: to live is to obey."[165] Heschel taught not only that God can exist beyond our understanding, but also that one can continue to be in relationship with God by doing what we perceive God to want.

The concluding anecdote of this chapter offers a poignant illustration of how Heschel believed that despite a response to theodicy being beyond what we can understand, he still believed that his theology is correct. Heschel told the story of how a friend of his was with a Holocaust survivor on a train. The Holocaust survivor initially declined to pray with Heschel's friend, saying "'I am never going to pray any more because of what happened to us

[162] *PT*, 285-286
[163] *PT*, 287
[164] *PT*, 287
[165] *PT*, 287

at Auschwitz… How could I pray?'"[166] But the next day, the man donned his *talit* and *tefillin* and decided to pray. He said, "'It suddenly dawned upon me to think how lonely God must be; look with whom He is left. I felt sorry for Him.'"[167] In this touching moment, the man articulated one of the central ideas of Heschel's theology: that God experiences pathos in God's dependence on humanity. This story therefore indicates that Heschel believed his theology to be true, even in the face of the horrors of the Holocaust. But, like the man on the train, Heschel's belief in his theology emerged out of silence and no explanation is given for how this man knows that God is lonely. This intuition remains super-rational, and by praying, the man responded by acting obediently. The core of Heschel's faith is therefore the product of a deeply-held conviction that transcends what he can explain rationally.

This chapter leaves us with the sense that although Heschel believed people should be humble about their capacities to respond to difficult theological questions, people can hold onto a response to theodicy that transcends what they can understand rationally. A picture of faith emerges: while we must take the limitations of our capacity to reason seriously, we can still hold onto our fundamental intuition of God's existence -- even if we can't explain in words how it is possible that God exists. Based on super-rational insight, we can respond through silence, song and action.

[166] *PT*, 302
[167] *PT*, 303

# 11. Conclusion

In a 2018 reflection in *Moment Magazine*, Torah scholar Avivah Zornberg wrote poignantly that in our contemporary era everything one says about God must be said "in a whisper."[168] Zornberg first explained that speaking in a whisper connotes a personal closeness to God. She wrote, "I would say that the only way we can [speak to God] is somehow in a tone of intimacy, speaking from the depths of one's heart to someone who is open to listening." Zornberg also wrote that whispering connotes the extent to which all claims about God are shrouded with uncertainty, especially after the Holocaust.[169]

Heschel's methodology for exploring super-rational knowledge responds well to the first prong of Zornberg's rationale for advocating for a whisper: by anchoring the beginning of his methodology in personal experience, Heschel's way of exploring theology allows for a personal and even intimate relationship with God.

But what of the second part of Zornberg's rationale for speaking in a whisper -- the extent to which what we say about God must be shrouded in uncertainty and caution, especially given the horrors of the Holocaust?

As we have seen, Heschel's theological method does allow for humility and offers guardrails against the dangers of total irrationalism, but in general, Heschel's tenor as a writer and thinker was not that of a whisper. Instead, Heschel was assertive and, as I examined in Section 3, he perhaps even overstated his certainty to compensate for the age of secularism in which he lived.

As I have explored the extent to which I believe Heschel provided a model for how to arrive at theology through the exploration of the super-rational, I have wondered whether

[168] Zornberg, "What is The Meaning of God Today?"
[169] Zornberg, "What is The Meaning of God Today?"

Heschel's conclusions could actually be interpreted as a rationale for embracing a retreat from theology altogether. If we will never arrive at definitive theological truth -- if the super-rational will always be characterized by polarities in tension and even contradiction, why not simply surrender the yearning for coherence and consistency?

However, as I have endeavored to argue, this would be a misreading of Heschel's intent in describing how to engage with super-rational inquiry. As I examined in Section 7, Heschel opposed an embrace of the irrational as an overarching guide to theological truth. Furthermore, Heschel was generally careful to provide a measured view of how to balance rationality and irrationality. Section 8, for example, underscores the extent to which Heschel's method included the moderating influences of tradition, dialectical thinking and humility.

As this inquiry comes to a close, it seems worth considering whether Heschel's boldness could in fact be seen as an asset. Despite Zornberg's caution that theological speculation should happen in a whisper, there is another current in our current theological moment that advocates for a "new language"[170] of theological possibility.

As I endeavored to argue in Section 9, one can understand theological engagement to be a necessary, even ethically-mandated, human endeavor. Within this context, could Heschel's way of engaging the super-rational offer a model for how to create a "new language" of theological possibility within the context of our fraught theological era?

I wonder if Heschel's balance of respecting rational thinking but not being beholden to it; his practice of beginning with personal religious experience while also being deeply engaged with tradition; the dynamism of his use of polarities; and his use of theological

[170] See Cohen, 183

contradiction while shying away from an embrace of irrationality all offer a model for answering the call for a theology that provides answers in our difficult era.

I personally understand the temptation to say that God manifests in one's life in many different ways and to say that there needn't be an effort at reconciling conflicting theological positions. But we can learn from Heschel's engagement with the super-rational that it is possible to honor the diversity of the ways the divine can appear in our lives while not surrendering to irrationality or incoherence.

Precisely because it is so difficult to make theological statements, we can learn from Heschel about the importance of a methodology that allows us to honor that complexity, while also striving for a certain boldness.

If Heschel is correct that the greatest problem we as humans face is indeed the problem "falsehood,"[171] pursuing the difficult truth of the super-rational becomes urgently important. While a pursuit of super-rational truth remains laborious and precarious, Heschel has shown us that it is possible to pursue it honestly -- and even boldly.

[171] *PT*, 158. See Section 9 for a discussion of the gravity of the problem of "falsehood."

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