



Abraham Joshua Heschel:

# A TWENTIETH CENTURY PROPHET

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# **Introduction**

## Introduction

During my first year of rabbinical school in 2014, living in Jerusalem, I knew that I wished to become a rabbi, though I had yet to form a theological foundation on which to build my Jewish practice. My Jewish upbringing was richly influenced by a number of different streams of Jewish thought and observance. I became a Bar Mitzvah at a large Reform synagogue in Dallas, joined a Conservative shul in high school and, throughout college, bounced between Chabad, Reform, Conservative and Orthodox minyanim. When I got to Jerusalem, I had already experienced a wide spectrum of Jewish settings and now was seeking a spiritual direction and theological home.

On one of my first attempts to observe Shabbat according to Halacha, HUC-JIR Provost Rabbi Dr. Michael Marmur suggested I read Abraham Joshua Heschel's "The Sabbath" over the course of that Shabbat afternoon. I was immediately captivated by Heschel's poetic style and intense nature. He writes, *"The Sabbath is not for the sake of the weekdays; the weekdays are for the sake of Sabbath. It is not an interlude but the climax of living."*<sup>1</sup> This is just one of many profound statements that propelled my interest to learn more about this man.

I found a thinker who somehow simultaneously comforted and challenged me. I so badly wanted to believe every word on the page, and yet, I was not truly a Sabbath-keeping Jew and did not intend to become one. The more Heschel I read, the more this sentiment began to grow. Heschel wrote about the importance of Halacha, that religious actions or deeds allow God to grow closer to us. He had convinced me that this was accurate; however, he had not influenced me to change my lifestyle.

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<sup>1</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*, Farrar, Straus & Young (New York), 1951

Over the next few years, I continued to engage with the writings of Heschel. Whether I was thinking about my personal Jewish practice, theology, social activism, or inter-faith work, his life and thought always appeared to be relevant. He was a type of icon; a Jewish hero who escaped the Holocaust, transformed the relationship between Jews and the Catholic Church, wrote prolifically on Jewish thought, theology and the human experience, and, of course, marched with his friend Martin Luther King, Jr. during the Civil Rights Era.

As I began thinking about my rabbinic thesis topic, it became clear to me that Heschel would be my focus. My initial interest in Heschel was motivated by my desire to enhance my religious practice. However, once I developed into an unapologetic Reform Jew, my reading of Heschel then became an academic pursuit; attempting to learn all I could about this inspiring individual while keeping my religious integrity intact. Over the course of the research and reading I have done for the purpose of this rabbinic thesis, I found that I no longer relate to Heschel through the lens of religiosity nor through the lens of academia, but rather as being in a relationship. Through his writing, Heschel has become a mentor of mine. He has taught me that one can be ironclad in their belief and still be accepting of every individual's convictions. Amongst the brokenness in the world and in our country, I find myself asking: what would Heschel do? In what rallies would he march? What policies and misfortunes would distress him? What actions would he take?

Interestingly, Heschel's connection to Judaism also began with living a religious life, turned towards the academic pursuit of understanding Judaism and then ultimately moved into action. Heschel was born in Warsaw, Poland in 1907 into a Hassidic family. In fact, both of his parents were each independently descendants of significant Hassidic rebbes.<sup>2</sup> At a young age,

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<sup>2</sup> Excerpt from: Kasimow, Harold & Sherwin, Byron L. (ed.s), *No Religion Is An Island: Abraham Joshua Heschel and Interreligious Dialogue*, Orbis Books (Maryknoll NY), 1991.

Heschel was recognized as being incredibly bright, having mastered the traditional texts of Torah, Mishnah and Talmud. Surprisingly, Heschel left the Hasidic community and spent time in Vilna and Berlin where he received a secular education first in Vilna and then at the University of Berlin. He would go on to attend a Reform seminary in Berlin called the Hochschule Wissenschaft Des Judentums. In 1942, Heschel was brought to America by HUC-JIR President Julian Morgenstern to serve as a faculty member of Hebrew Union College.<sup>3</sup> The appointment to the faculty secured for Heschel an American work visa, ultimately saving his life as he was attempting to escape Nazi occupied Europe. Heschel remained in Cincinnati for five years before moving to New York City where he took a faculty position at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

During the 50s and early 60s, Heschel was an incredibly prolific writer, producing the majority of his major published works. Then, in the mid 1960's, there was a radical shift in Heschel's thinking and he became fully immersed in the work of social activism. One could argue that Heschel modeled his life's trajectory after Maimonides. After Rambam wrote arguably the greatest commentary on Torah and Mitzvot (*Sefer Hamitzvot*), the most authoritative code of Halacha (*Mishneh Torah*) and one of the most provocative Jewish philosophical works (*Moreh Nevukhim/Guide for the Perplexed*), for the last ten years of his life, he worked simply as a doctor. After his academic pursuits, Maimonides felt that his duty was to

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"My father was born in Warsaw. His father was a Hasidic rebbe, Moshe Mordechai, born and Mezhbich and known as the Mezhbizher rebbe of Warsaw, who died during an influenza epidemic when my father was only nine years old. His grave remains in the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw. My father's mother was Rivke Reizel Perlow, born in Novominsker, daughter of the Novominsker rebbe, a woman recognized for her deep piety. Her twin brother became the Novominsker rebbe and also came to live in Warsaw. She has no grave, having been murdered by the Nazis. Both of my fathers parents were descended from long lines of Hasidic rebbes, dynasties of royalty in the Jewish world of Europe. My grandmother was a direct descendent of the Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz and Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, while my grandfather descended from the Maggid of Meseritch, the Apter Rav, and the Rizhiner rebbe."

<sup>3</sup> Meyer, Michael A. "The Refugee Scholars Project of the Hebrew Union College", in *A Bicentennial Festschrift for Jacob Rader Marcus*, 1976.

heal and care for people. Similarly, after Heschel wrote his major works, he moved into a world of social activism; attempting to “heal the soul of the nation.”<sup>4</sup>

As I will attempt to demonstrate in the chapter focusing on social action, Heschel’s involvement in activism clearly stems from his thinking about the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. Heschel began analyzing the prophets when he wrote his doctoral dissertation on the subject at the University of Berlin in 1933.<sup>5</sup> Heschel understood this body of writing to be primarily a matter of social concern. That is, he believed the prophets had an intimate knowledge of the will of God and acted in the world as to bring about God’s will. In a journal article titled, “The Divine Pathos: The Basic Category of Prophetic Theology”, Heschel writes, “How can we define prophetic consciousness in relation to God? The prophetic consciousness was, of course, a consciousness about the world, but the prophets did not see the world as a superficial succession of causes and effects; they saw it rather as a meaningful relation among events...The prophets never ask: ‘*What is God?*’ They are interested only in [God’s] activity and influence in human affairs.”<sup>6</sup> The prophet is ever aware of human suffering and God’s intimate reaction to that distress. Susannah Heschel commented on her father’s reading of the bible, particularly of the prophets, saying “Everything else grew out of that understanding: the nature of morality, of prayer, as well as the centrality of political commitments.”<sup>7</sup>

In a work titled, “Prophetic Inspiration in the Middle Ages”, Heschel argues against the claim that prophetic inspiration ended with the death of Zechariah and Malachi. In summary, Heschel claims that prophecy and prophets continue through the medieval era and into contemporary times and takes a number of different forms. Heschel concludes this article by

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<sup>4</sup> Marmur, Michael. "Divine Pathos and Wonder." Lecture, August 29, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Marmur, Michael. "Divine Pathos and Wonder." Lecture, August 29, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> "The Divine Pathos: The Basic Category of Prophetic Theology", *Judaism*, vol.2, no.1 (January 1953), pp.61-67

<sup>7</sup> Heschel, Susannah: “Theological Affinities in the Writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King, Jr.”, *Conservative Judaism*, vol. 50, no.s 2-3 (1998), pp.134

stating, “There is no doubt that the prophets who did arise in the Middle Ages were worthy of the name.”<sup>8</sup> Heschel believed there were others who merited the title “prophet”. At an engagement with the Rabbinic Assembly, Heschel introduced his friend Martin Luther King, Jr., saying, “Where in America today do we hear a voice like the voice of the prophets of Israel? Martin Luther King is a sign that God has not forsaken the United States of America. God has sent him to us. His presence is the hope of America.” Heschel deemed King a prophet, and King, in turn, spoke similarly of Heschel, when he said, “Heschel is indeed a truly great prophet... Here and there we find those who refuse to remain silent behind the safe security of stained-glass windows, and they are forever seeking to make the great ethical insights of our Judeo-Christian heritage relevant in this day and in this age. I feel that Rabbi Heschel is one of the persons who is relevant at all times, always standing with prophetic insights to guide us through these difficult days.”<sup>9</sup> King and Heschel regarded each other as deserving the title prophet and for men who were so heavily influenced by the writings of the prophets...there is no higher praise. Both men were not merely observers of a broken society but, rather, acted as the mouthpiece of God. “Their words carry an urgency that indicate their own deep engagement as people standing in the presence of God. Such a stance is precisely what characterizes the nature of the prophet, argues Heschel.”<sup>10</sup>

Like the Prophets in the Hebrew Bible, the contemporary prophet is positioned in society with a platform to reach the masses and has a relationship with a political leader of that society. Whereas the prophet Isaiah had political alliances with kings Uzziah and Hezekiah, Heschel held

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<sup>8</sup> *Prophetic Inspiration After the Prophets: Maimonides and Other Medieval Authorities*, Ktav (Hoboken NJ), 1996.

<sup>9</sup> Heschel, Susannah: “Theological Affinities in the Writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King, Jr.”, *Conservative Judaism*, vol. 50, no.s 2-3 (1998).

<sup>10</sup> Heschel, Susannah: “Theological Affinities in the Writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King, Jr.”, *Conservative Judaism*, vol. 50, no.s 2-3 (1998).

audiences with leaders such as the Pope of the Catholic Church and the President of the United States. Furthermore, Heschel was bold enough to even make ethical demands of these leaders.

In 1963, President John F. Kennedy invited Heschel to be present at a meeting at the White House regarding Civil Rights. Heschel responded with the following telegram:

*"I look forward to privilege of being present at meeting tomorrow... Likelihood that Negro problem will be like the weather. Everybody talks about it but nobody does anything about it. Please demand of religious leaders personal involvement, not just solemn declaration. We forfeit the right to worship God as long as we continue to humiliate Negroes. Church synagogues have failed. They must repent. Ask of religious leaders to call for national repentance and personal sacrifice. Let religious leaders donate one month's salary toward fund for Negro housing and education... The hour calls for moral grandeur and spiritual audacity."*<sup>11</sup>

The invitation alone is illustration enough of Heschel's position in society and as "prophet". In biblical terms, the king has called the prophet to seek his spiritual guidance and to hear the will of God. Heschel takes his prophetic position one step further by making a request of the highest official in the American government to take action as well as simultaneously reprimanding his fellow religious leaders for falling short of their spiritual and ethical duties.

Heschel influenced the Jewish world and reached beyond it to the world at large. I yearned to learn more. Heschel once wrote, "What we need more than anything else is not textbooks but text people."<sup>12</sup> With Heschel as my guide, I attempted to transform myself from a person who was reading Heschel into a person who could become a teacher of Heschel.

Admittedly, I have great deal to learn before I can truly fill that role. However, I see this thesis as

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<sup>11</sup> Telegram from Abraham Joshua Heschel to President John F. Kennedy, June 16, 1963. Published in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual audacity: essays*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), vii.

<sup>12</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel. "The Spirit of Jewish Education." *Jewish Education*, Fall 1953, pp. 9-20.



the first step in a long journey of becoming a text-person. Over the course of writing this thesis, one thing has become abundantly clear: from his theological worldview to his political social activism, Abraham Joshua Heschel not only studied the prophets, he lived a life that made him worthy of being called one.

**Chapter One:**  
**Inter-Religious Dialogue**  
*Heschel's Role in Nostra Aetate*

## **Inter-Religious Dialogue: Heschel's Engagement with Vatican II**

### **Historical Context**

World War II and the horrors of the Shoah represent, for many, history's darkest hour. The systematic extermination of European Jewry demonstrated for the world just how ugly the Third Reich could be. The world needed a righteous and moral leader to condemn the Final Solution and other butcheries taking place in the Nazi occupation of Europe. Unfortunately, the sitting pope during these atrocities, Pope Pius XII, made little to no effort in speaking out against the Shoah. On multiple occasions, leaders of the world, including the Chief Rabbi of Palestine, Isaac Herzog, petitioned Pope Pius XII to make a statement or reach out to political officials, but Pius XII continuously refused.<sup>13</sup> As one might imagine, this created quite a large barrier between the Catholic church and the Jewish people.

In October of 1958, after the death of Pope Pius XII, a man by the name of Angelo Roncalli was elected pope and took the name John XXIII. On January 25th, 1959, just months after his coronation, Pope John XXIII called for the 21<sup>st</sup> ecumenical Council of the Catholic Church to be held in 1961. Though delayed, in October 1962, Pope John XXIII declared open the council; best known by the title Vatican II, as it was the second ecumenical council to ever take place in Vatican City, Rome. This Council was tasked with addressing relations between the Catholic church and the outside world. Many scholars would argue that religious reform takes place when a religious community engages with a metaphorical invitation to modernity. Through this lens, one could claim that the Catholic Church was searching for reform within itself.

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<sup>13</sup> "Pope Pius XII & the Holocaust." Accessed December 4, 2018.  
<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/pope-pius-xii-and-the-holocaust>.

Arguably, the most crucial declaration that came out of the Vatican II was a document titled *Nostra Aetate*<sup>14</sup>. Ultimately, this document served as the Declaration on the Relations of the Church with Non-Christian Religions; however it was originally conceived to be a statement on Catholic-Jewish relations. In the wake of the Holocaust, the Catholic church recognized that a significant change was necessary in order to move forward in the modern world. This begs the question: “Why Now”? Why did this particular Pope care about this issue and why did he find it necessary to begin this process when he did?

In historical context, the late 50’s and early 60’s was about the time the world began to address the reality of the Holocaust. Even many famous Jewish Holocaust authors, such as Ellie Weisel, Primo Levi and Viktor Frankl waited nearly a generation after the end of the war before they began writing about the Holocaust. Perhaps discussing the Holocaust and the deep prejudices faced by the Jewish people was too close and painful to confront prior to this period. For the Pope to address the need for the Catholic church to reach out to it’s Jewish neighbors was, by no exaggeration, extraordinary! Where Pope Pius XII had remained neutral, silent and compliant during the Holocaust, Pope John XXIII was proactive, revolutionary and deeply sympathetic after the Shoah. Published in April of 1963, six months after the opening of Vatican II, *Pacem in Terris*<sup>15</sup>, the Encyclical of Pope John XXIII on Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity and Liberty, serves as a window into the soul of this saintly man. Traditionally, an Encyclical is a papal letter sent to all bishops of the Roman Catholic Church. However, Pope John XXIII decided to address his message as follows:

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<sup>14</sup> “Nostra Aetate.” Proclaimed by his holiness Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965. [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html)

<sup>15</sup> Pope John XXIII. “Pacem in Terris”. April 11, 1963. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_j-xxiii\\_enc\\_11041963\\_pacem.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html)”

*“To Our Venerable Brethren the Patriarchs, Primates, Archbishops, Bishops, and all other Local Ordinaries who are at Peace and in Communion with the Apostolic See, and to the Clergy and Faithful of the entire Catholic World, and to all Men of Good Will.”*<sup>16</sup>

Right from the beginning, Pope John XXIII made it clear that he viewed his role as a leader and a role model to extend further than the typical reach of the Catholic Church. To address “*all men of good will*” was a radical shift from the customary salutation. Among the headings and subheadings of *Pacem in Terris*, readers find titles such as “The Right to Worship God According to One’s Conscience”, “Equality of Men”, “The Treatment of Minorities”, and more. Pope XXIII ends his address with the following, “*upon all men of good will, to whom We also address this encyclical, We implore from God health and prosperity.*”<sup>17</sup> This Pope stood for equality, truth, justice and the universal good. He saw that the Church’s only way forward was to address the past and make concessions in the future. Upon inquiry as to why he called for the council, Pope John XXIII is quoted as saying, “*The Church today is watching a society in crisis. While mankind is at the threshold of a new era, grave and immense tasks await the Church just as in the most tragic epochs of its history...[I expect the council] to be a breath of fresh air that would allow the Church out of its ghetto.*”<sup>18</sup>

In order for Pope John XXIII to generate such a large undertaking, he required other progressive thinkers and leaders in the Catholic Church. He assigned Cardinal Augustin Bea to research and prepare a formal statement on the Jews to be submitted to the council.<sup>19</sup> At the time,

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<sup>16</sup> Pope John XXIII. “Pacem in Terris”. April 11, 1963. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_j-xxiii\\_enc\\_11041963\\_pacem.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html)”

<sup>17</sup> Pope John XXIII. “Pacem in Terris”. April 11, 1963. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_j-xxiii\\_enc\\_11041963\\_pacem.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html)”

<sup>18</sup> Sklarin, Yigal. “‘Rushing in Where Angels Fear to Tread’: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the Rabbinical Council of America, Modern Orthodox Jewry and the Second Vatican Council.” *Modern Judaism* 29, no. 3 (2009): 351–385.

<sup>19</sup> Sklarin.

Cardinal Bea was serving as the President of the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity (SPCU). To explain why exactly Pope John XXIII selected Cardinal Bea would simply be speculation. Though, according to Yigal Sklarin, it is possible that the Pope entrusted Bea with this task due to the fact that Cardinal Bea was willing to admit that “the violent and criminal outbursts of antisemitism in Nazi Germany thirty years prior were linked to anti-Jewish propaganda based on a deliberate misuse of Scripture.”<sup>20</sup> Sklarin argues that, “Nazi propaganda influenced many devout Christians by using misconstrued Church teaching to condemn the Jews, acknowledged Cardinal Bea. Many in the Church believed it would have to reassess its evaluation of the Jews.”<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, the Catholic Church, by way of Cardinal Bea, began a process of reaching out to Jewish leadership. Seeing as “The Jews” do not have a central power, like the Pope or corresponding counter-parts to Cardinals or Bishops, the SPCU initially contacted the World Jewish Congress as well as the World Conference of Jewish Organizations. Soon after, the American Jewish Committee, under the leadership of Abraham Joshua Heschel, was brought into the dialogue.

Though there was never a definitive leading voice of the Jews, two accepted leaders of the Jewish community emerged: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Who were these men that they be regarded as a voice for the Jews? Additionally, why was Rabbi Soloveitchik unwilling to enter inter-religious dialogue with the Catholic Church while Rabbi Heschel happily entered a relationship with cardinal Bea?

### **Why Was Rabbi Soloveitchik Unwilling to Participate?**

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik served as the Rosh Yeshiva at the Rabbi Isaac Elchan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University. According to a Rabbinical Council of America

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<sup>20</sup> Sklarin.

<sup>21</sup> Sklarin.

publication, “[He] is the acknowledged intellectual leader of and spokesman for Halakhic Judaism...Because of Rabbi Soloveitchik’s prominent position, his approach to one of the most delicate and sensitive issues that faces world Jewry is bound to have far-reaching repercussions on future developments.”<sup>22</sup>

Why is it that Soloveitchik was unwilling to act as the church’s partner as it seemingly began its process of reform? In the winter of 1964, Rabbi Soloveitchik addressed the Rabbinical Council of America, the organized body of American Orthodox Rabbis which could be compared to the Central Conference of American Rabbis for Reform rabbis or the Rabbinic Assembly for Conservative rabbis. His address, entitled *Confrontation*, began by elucidating three levels human experience. In short, there is the non-confronted man, who lives life unaware of his own existence as separate from the world. Next, there is the confronted man, who views the world as existentially separate from the self. The confronted man is plagued by the paradox of freedom and obligation. Lastly, Soloveitchik describes the man confronted by “the other”. This man is forced to communicate with his fellow man, charged with task of coming to know this other person. Soloveitchik writes, “This time it is not the confrontation of a subject who gazes, with a sense of superiority, at the object beneath him, but of two equal subjects, both lonely in their otherness and uniqueness, both opposed and rejected by an objective order, both craving for companionship... This time, the two confronters stand alongside each other, each admitting the existence of the other.”<sup>23</sup>

Soloveitchik then transitions and states, but for Jews, we are doubly confronted! He claims that we, like the rest of humanity, are confronted simply by nature of being self-aware

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<sup>22</sup> Soloveitchik, Joseph B. “CONFRONTATION.” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 6, no. 2 (1964): 5–29.

<sup>23</sup> Soloveitchik.

human beings. Yet also, “As members of a covenantal community which has preserved its identity under most unfavorable conditions, [we are] confronted by another faith community.”<sup>24</sup> Although, this confrontation with another faith community is not altogether viewed negatively. Soloveitchik writes, “There is no contradiction between coordinating our cultural activities with all men and at the same time confronting them as members of another faith community.”<sup>25</sup> That is to say, simply speaking with Christian people is not at all an issue. However, he also argues, “It is self-evident that a confrontation of two faith communities is possible only if it is accompanied by a clear assurance that both parties will enjoy equal rights and full religious freedom. [The Jews] shall resent any attempt on the part of the community of the many to engage us in a peculiar encounter in which our confronter will command us to take a position beneath him, while placing himself no alongside of but above us.”

Perhaps most importantly, Soloveitchik’s reasoning becomes quite clear when he states the following:

“The relationship between two communities must be outer-directed and related to the secular orders with which men of faith come face to face. In the secular sphere, we may discuss positions to be taken, ideas to be evolved, and plans to be formulated. In these matters, religious communities may together recommend action to be developed and may seize the initiative to be implemented later by general society... If the powerful community of the many feels like remedying an embarrassing human situation or redressing an historic wrong, it should do so at the human ethical level. However, if the debate should revolve around matters of faith, then one of the confronters will be

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<sup>24</sup> Soloveitchik.

<sup>25</sup> Soloveitchik.



impelled to avail himself of the language of his opponent. This in itself would mean surrender of individuality and distinctiveness.”<sup>26</sup>

After Rabbi Soloveitchik delivered these remarks, the Rabbinical Council of America adopted a statement which stated, “Each religious community is endowed with intrinsic dignity and metaphysical worth. Its historical experience, its present dynamics, its hopes and aspirations for the future can only be interpreted in terms of full spiritual independence of and freedom from any relatedness to another faith community. Any suggestion that the historical and meta-historical worth of a faith community be viewed against the backdrop of another faith, and the mere hint that revision of basic historic attitudes is anticipated, are incongruous with the fundamentals of religious liberty and freedom of conscience and can only breed discord and suspicion.”<sup>27</sup> Needless to say, Soloveitchik’s address to this collection of rabbis was received well and his thinking was reflected in their statement. Not only did Rabbi Soloveitchik reject Cardinal Bea’s invitation, he also was influential enough to deter the majority of the American Orthodox community to remove themselves from any inter-religious dialogue with the Catholic Church.

Ultimately, we can identify two main reasons for Soloveitchik’s rejection of this opportunity for inter-religious dialogue. First, it is quite possible that he believed in his heart that centuries of discrimination, persecution and violent proselytization could not be overlooked. He remembered the recent anti-Semitism and complacency of the Church during the Holocaust and the destruction of European Jewry. He may have decided that the Catholic Church viewed itself as the superior subject in the confrontation of two faith communities and, therefore, was not the partner with whom he wanted to work. Though, this is all largely speculation. Secondly and

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<sup>26</sup> Soloveitchik.

<sup>27</sup> Soloveitchik.

more definitively, we can say that Soloveitchik did not participate in dialogue with Cardinal Bea due to the inherently religious nature of the conversation.

### **Why did Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel Participate?**

All the while, Heschel eagerly accepted Cardinal Bea's invitation... but why? One factor could very well be his loving and supportive family. Heschel was born into a prominent Hasidic family, and yet, with the blessing of his mother, he received a secular education in Vilna and Germany. From a very early age, Heschel was learning with and from people who were different than him and his family of origin. He was always looking to stretch his horizons and grow his intellect.

We can look at Heschel's essay "No religion is an Island" to understand that while Heschel was deeply and authentically Jewish, his humanity and the humanity of "the other" created a profound connection between two peoples that no set of dissimilar religious beliefs could serve as barrier. Heschel writes, "On what basis do we people of different religious commitments meet one another? First and foremost, we meet as human beings who have much in common: a heart, a face, a voice, the presence of a soul, fears, hope, the ability to trust, a capacity for compassion and understanding, the kinship of being human."<sup>28</sup> Rabbi Heschel and Rabbi Soloveitchik actually have similar starting points. When attempting to address the question, "Shall I engage in inter-religious dialogue?" both men began by asking, "Well...what is the nature of man?" For Soloveitchik, Jewish and Christian people are similar in that we are both "confronted beings". While Heschel believes that, "the human is a disclosure of the divine, and all men are one in God's care for man. Many things on earth are precious, some are holy,

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<sup>28</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. "No Religion Is an Island", *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, vol.21, no.2, part 1 (January 1966), pp.117-134.

humanity is holy of holies.”<sup>29</sup> Heschel argues that as Jews and Christians, we are ultimately people. Moreover, by nature of being human, we all take part in a universal religious experience: living. Heschel passionately writes, “No religion is an island. We are all involved with one another. Spiritual betrayal on the part of one of us affects the faith of all of us. Views adopted in one community have an impact on other communities. Today religious isolationism is a myth. For all the profound differences in perspective and substance, Judaism is sooner or later affected by the intellectual, moral and spiritual events within Christian society, and vice versa.”<sup>30</sup> As human beings taking part in the great experiment of religious life, Heschel believes we are all connected.

Heschel believes that Judaism and humanity are best served when we better understand “the other”. In contrast to Rabbi Soloveitchik, Heschel is willing to engage in inter-religious dialogue, though he is not completely void of reservations. Heschel states, “At a time of paucity of faith, interfaith may become a substitute for faith, suppressing authenticity for the sake of compromise. In a world of conformity, religions can easily be levelled down to the lowest common denominator. Both communication and separation are necessary. We must preserve our individuality as well as foster care for one another, reverence, understanding and cooperation.”<sup>31</sup> As I will attempt to demonstrate, Heschel never compromised nor attempted to conform any aspect of Jewish practice. Rather, he used the opportunity for inter-religious dialogue to inform the Catholic leadership how Judaism experiences the Catholic Church.

While Heschel enters the conversation, he is certainly cautious. He writes, “dialogue must not degenerate into a dispute, into an effort on the part of each to get the upper hand. There

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<sup>29</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. "No Religion Is an Island", *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, vol.21, no.2, part 1 (January 1966), pp.117-134.

<sup>30</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. "No Religion Is an Island", *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, vol.21, no.2, part 1 (January 1966), pp.117-134.

<sup>31</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. "No Religion Is an Island", *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, vol.21, no.2, part 1 (January 1966), pp.117-134.

is an unfortunate history of Christian-Jewish disputations, motivated by the desire to prove how blind the Jews are and carried on in a spirit of opposition, which eventually degenerated into enmity... Indeed, there is a deep chasm between Christians and Jews...but across the chasm we can extend our hands to one another.”<sup>32</sup>In my opinion, the quintessential depiction of Heschel is of him standing in the center of the Jewish community looking outwards and extending his hands to all humanity. It seems to me that Heschel was so secure in who he was and what he believed, that he was never threatened by the “other”.

In the concluding paragraph of *No Religion is an Island*, Heschel poignantly asks, “What, then, is the purpose of interreligious cooperation?” Heschel continues, “It is neither to flatter nor to refute one another, but to help one another; to share insight and learning, to cooperate in academic ventures on the highest scholarly level, and what is even more important to search in the wilderness for well-springs of devotion, for treasures of stillness, for the power of love and care for man.”<sup>33</sup> This is exactly what Heschel did in the context of Vatican II. When the Catholic Church was searching for Jewish partners... Heschel was there to heed the call.

### **What transpired?**

The Church found its partner in Rabbi Heschel, but how exactly was he involved? In the period of time between the Pope calling for the Council in 1959 and the actual opening of Vatican II in 1962, the American Jewish Committee under the leadership of Rabbi Heschel, drafted a number of memoranda detailing the extent of Anti-Jewish components found in the current Church’s educational materials, doctrines and liturgies.<sup>34</sup> These three memoranda were

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<sup>32</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. "No Religion Is an Island", *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, vol.21, no.2, part 1 (January 1966), pp.117-134.

<sup>33</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. "No Religion Is an Island", *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, vol.21, no.2, part 1 (January 1966), pp.117-134.

<sup>34</sup> Tanenbaum, Marc H. "Heschel and Vatican II: Jewish-Christian Relations." *Memorial Symposium in Honor of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel*, February 21, 1983. P 1-23.

requested by Cardinal Bea and were to serve as research data in the preliminary stages of Vatican II, prior to its opening.

The first of these reports was titled, *The Image of the Jew in Catholic Teaching*, and outlined the perceived issues from a number of Catholic textbooks. Among a handful of other issues, this memorandum highlighted that the Catholic Church failed to acknowledge that Catholicism stemmed out of the Jewish faith and that there were many hostile references to Jews as a whole; e.g. “Blood thirsty Jews” or “the blind hatred of the Jews”.<sup>35</sup> However, the most crucial issue found in Catholic instruction was the idea that the Jews are an accursed nation because they killed Jesus Christ. The term deicide, meaning the killer of God, is attributed to the Jewish people by the Catholic Church. This dangerous label has been the cause of much violence and persecution to the Jewish people for centuries.

The second memorandum, entitled *Anti-Jewish Elements in Catholic Liturgy*, also largely addressed the deicide charge. According to Rabbi Marc Tannenbaum, The American Jewish Committee (AJC) did acknowledge in this report that the Catholic Church had recently removed a number of anti-Jewish expressions from their liturgy, however, found that prejudices nevertheless lingered in specific texts. The AJC concluded this memorandum by petitioning the Church to, “rectify liturgical passages which stimulate and reinforce the slanderous concept of the Jew as a cursed, despised, deicide people.”<sup>36</sup>

After these two reports were submitted to Cardinal Bea, Rabbi Heschel and members of The American Jewish Committee were invited to the Vatican to discuss the documents with Cardinal Bea himself. After this dialogue, Cardinal Bea charged Rabbi Heschel and the AJC to create a set of suggestions that might rectify the issues outlined in the memoranda. In May of

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<sup>35</sup> Tanenbaum.

<sup>36</sup> Tanenbaum.

1962, Rabbi Heschel submitted a third memorandum entitled, *On Improving Catholic-Jewish Relations*. This document functioned as a proposed solution rather than a catalogue of offenses. In short, this memorandum recommended that the Catholic Church make a statement recognizing the respectability and perpetuity of the Jewish religion and cease regarding the Jews as potential converts. In addition, the church must make a clear statement condemning anti-Semitism and rejecting the notion of the Jews as an accursed nation that killed Jesus.

In the words of Rabbi Tannenbaum, “This was not a conventional memorandum. It was pure Heschel, flaming with his Jewish spirituality and his prophetic passion against injustice.”<sup>37</sup> Heschel’s introduction is filled with references to the prophets, a mutual body of religious text that both Jews and Christians have in their respective canons. He concludes his introductory remarks with the following: “This is the outstanding characteristic of the prophets: openness to the historic situation, to the divine call and its demands. In their eyes the human situation may be a divine emergency”.<sup>38</sup> Here, Heschel is providing a biblical framing for the gravitas of this contemporary moment. He is stating that by the Catholic-Church engaging in this process of reform in light of the historical context, they are living out values that the prophets inculcated.

Though the entire text would be entirely too long to include in this chapter, I believe the following excerpt from *On Improving Catholic-Jewish Relations* captures the sentiment and overarching theme of the memorandum as a whole:

*“Anti-Semitism is an ancient and complex evil, which cannot be ascribed to a single cause. Nor can responsibility for its perpetuation be invested in one particular institution. Yet, in response to the prophetic call for justice, and our of respect for the six*

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<sup>37</sup> Tanenbaum.

<sup>38</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. “On Improving Catholic-Jewish Relations.” Accessed November 28, 2018. <http://50.62.215.124/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/second-vatican-council/naprecursors/1261-heschel1962may22>.

*million innocent martyred, we must ask that all institutions – political, civic and religious – examine and uproot possible sources of anti-Semitism in themselves; and we must confront each of the sources, including invidious religious teachings. Foremost among these is the slanderous claim that “the Jews” are collectively responsible for the Crucifixion of Jesus, that because of this the Jews are accursed and condemned to suffer dispersion and deprivation throughout the ages. This charge has been used by anti-Semites for centuries, to justify the most cruel and inhuman treatment of Jews; it has even been advanced to justify the fate of six million Jews during the Nazi holocaust.*

*Because we recognize that the Roman Catholic Church represents a rock of solidarity, belief and morality in the world where so many values in the moral, ethical and religious spheres have floundered, we ask the Church’s assistance in putting an end to such slanderous religious teachings, and in thus assuring that anti-Semites can claim no sanction in Catholic religious teachings.”<sup>39</sup>*

This passionately worded statement holds the Catholic Church responsible for its injustices, while also recognizing that the Church is not to be held solely accountable for the advent of anti-Semitism. Heschel is framing the potential significance that Vatican II could have on the world, should the Church act on proposals that this memorandum sets forth.

The first proposal deals with the charge of deicide. Heschel suggests that the Church, “[Should] declare that calling a Jew “Christ-Killer” is a grave sin. This condemnation should be disseminated widely under the highest authority of the Roman Catholic Church to all who are

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<sup>39</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. “On Improving Catholic-Jewish Relations.” Accessed November 28, 2018. <http://50.62.215.124/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/second-vatican-council/naprecursors/1261-heschel1962may22>.

charged with the preaching and teaching mission of the Church and to all who are responsible for the spiritual guidance of the faithful.”<sup>40</sup>

The second proposal suggests that the Catholic Church regard the Jew’s love for Torah as a legitimate form of religious practice and freedom. In order that the Catholic Church stop regarding Jews as potential converts, Heschel writes, “Thus is our sincere hope that the Ecumenical Council would acknowledge the integrity and permanent preciousness of Jews and Judaism.”<sup>41</sup>

The third proposal speaks to the necessity of both Jews and Catholics to better understand each other’s religious teachings and ideas. Heschel bases his argument in the prophetic writings of Amos and Micah, who instructed the people to “Hate evil and love what is good”<sup>42</sup> (Amos 5:15) as well as “to do justice, to love kindness (hesed), and to walk humbly with your God.”<sup>43</sup> (Micah 6:8). He claims that, in this context, justice and love would manifest if the Church were “to disseminate positive information about Jews and Judaism; to promote mutual understanding and a greater mutual comprehension of the issues between us and also of the richness of each other’s heritage.”<sup>44</sup> Heschel proposes three modalities in which this proposal could be enacted. First, the creation of a forum in which Catholic priests and theologians could discuss their views about Jews. Second, academic endeavors such as research projects and publications could be written collaboratively by both Jewish and Catholic scholars. Lastly, Heschel suggests that a

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<sup>40</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. “On Improving Catholic-Jewish Relations.” Accessed November 28, 2018. <http://50.62.215.124/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/second-vatican-council/naprecursors/1261-heschel1962may22>.

<sup>41</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. “On Improving Catholic-Jewish Relations.” Accessed November 28, 2018. <http://50.62.215.124/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/second-vatican-council/naprecursors/1261-heschel1962may22>.

<sup>42</sup> Amos 5:15

<sup>43</sup> Micah 6:8

<sup>44</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. “On Improving Catholic-Jewish Relations.” Accessed November 28, 2018. <http://50.62.215.124/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/second-vatican-council/naprecursors/1261-heschel1962may22>.



declaration be made “reaffirming earlier Papal and Vatican pronouncements encouraging cooperation among religious groups in civic affairs to promote the common good.”<sup>45</sup>

The fourth and final proposal suggests that the Catholic Church could establish a new organizational structure in order to increase awareness of injustices. Heschel writes, “In order for the Church to more fully and effectively disseminate to its faithful throughout the world its abhorrence of anti-Semitism, we respectfully propose the following: 1) We request that a permanent high-level commission be establish at the Vatican for the purpose of eliminating prejudice and of watching over Christian-Jewish relations everywhere. 2) We further request that at every diocese, a similar commission be established to further the demands of justice and love.”<sup>46</sup>

According to Rabbi Tannenbaum, this memorandum caused Jewish-Christian relations to be the topic of much discussion. Academic and religious articles were penned and published throughout the United States, Europe and Latin America on the topic of Catholic-Jewish relations.<sup>47</sup> It comes as no surprise that these conversations generated both great support and great opposition to the collective project of Cardinal Bea and Rabbi Heschel.

On March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1963, during the first few months of Vatican II Council, Cardinal Bea he met with a conference of religious and communal leaders of the Jewish people at the AJC building in New York. Rabbi Heschel served as the chairman of this gathering and focused the agenda on the same issues which were presented in the three memoranda. Cardinal Bea made it clear to this gathering that he viewed Heschel’s propositions favorably and even went as far to

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<sup>45</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. “On Improving Catholic-Jewish Relations.” Accessed November 28, 2018. <http://50.62.215.124/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/second-vatican-council/naprecursors/1261-heschel1962may22>.

<sup>46</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. “On Improving Catholic-Jewish Relations.” Accessed November 28, 2018. <http://50.62.215.124/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/second-vatican-council/naprecursors/1261-heschel1962may22>.

<sup>47</sup> Tanenbaum.

say that Pope John XXIII also approved of the assessments and recommendations made to the Church.<sup>48</sup>

After this meeting, there appeared to be a seemingly clear path to a historic declaration made on behalf of the Catholic-Church on the relation of Jews and Christians. However, on June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1963, Pope John XXIII died. The council suddenly fell under the new leadership of Pope Paul VI. As the Ecumenical council continued, the foundational issues of this anticipated declaration were made public when The New York Times published an article on the front page detailing the major themes.<sup>49</sup> In response to this newspaper article, Rabbi Heschel made the following personal statement, “The report about a Declaration to be introduced to the Ecumenical council fills me with a sense of intense gratification. Such a declaration, will, should it be adopted, open new sources of spiritual insight for the Western world. It is an expression of the integrity and ultimate earnestness of those who are inspired by the consciousness of living in the presence of God, the Lord and the Judge of history. May the spirit of God guide the work of the Council.”<sup>50</sup>

When Cardinal Bea officially introduced the draft to the council, Marc Tannenbaum comments that it “...drew the session’s loudest round of applause. The next day, Cardinal Bea was given a warm and attentive hearing when he stated the document was drafted at the late Pope John’s instruction, and that the history of the Nazi crimes made authoritative action by the Church imperative.”<sup>51</sup> At this moment, this draft seemed as if it would surely be accepted by the council; however, this soon took a turn.

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<sup>48</sup> Tanenbaum.

<sup>49</sup> Tanenbaum.

<sup>50</sup> Tanenbaum.

<sup>51</sup> Tanenbaum.

With pressure from certain Arab prelates as well as many conservative leaning Church leaders, there was a motion to shift the leadership of this declaration away from Cardinal Bea. Simultaneously, Marc Tannenbaum details that an alternative text was being drafted, containing highly troublesome articles stating the expectation that Jews would convert to become Christian as well as reinforcing the guilt of the Jews for deicide. As this knowledge was made aware to Rabbi Heschel, he wrote the following to Cardinal Bea, “I am informed of a few phrases which may not only mar the splendor of this magnificent document but may, God forbid, virtually nullify the abundance of blessing contained therein...”<sup>52</sup> Though it would appear that this letter did not hold much influence on Cardinal Bea. When the third session of the Ecumenical council commenced, the newly revised draft was introduced. In response, Heschel wrote an intensely worded statement which heavily criticized the revisions. He also was granted a meeting with Pope Paul VI, in which they briefly discussed the precepts of the article. It was made clear to Heschel that the Pope personally felt that the newly revised draft document was affable towards the Jewish people, yet ultimately, the decision would be up to the council. The Pope also claimed that, “it is primarily a religious document and cannot be ruled by people from the outside. He said the passage on conversion was based on scriptures of the New Testament. It is what the Church itself has expressed and the Jews are not obliged to accept. The deicide statement is also based on the scriptures of the New Testament.”<sup>53</sup> It was clear that Heschel found no great friend in this new Pope. However, Heschel has made an incredible impact on the members of the council.

In mid-September of the same year, “170 of the 240 Bishops from the United States met in [an] urgent conference and publicly called for a return to the sense of the original

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<sup>52</sup> Tanenbaum.

<sup>53</sup> Tanenbaum.

document.”<sup>54</sup> When the language of the document came up for debate on September 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup>, Heschel seemed to win the day! Rabbi Tannenbaum recounts, “In the wake of that historic debate...a final text was drafted. Unlike earlier versions, it encompassed all the great non-Christian religions, but the passages concerning Jews and Judaism closely resembled what Cardinal Bea had proposed in the first place.”<sup>55</sup> When the final draft of the text discussing Jewish-Catholic relations came to a vote, the declaration was passed by an overwhelming 1,700 votes for and only 185 votes against. Immediately after the official vote, Pope Paul VI asserted that this historic declaration was the official teaching of the Catholic Church.<sup>56</sup>

How then can we quantify Rabbi Heschel’s impact on these proceedings? If the accounts of how this declaration came to be were not illustrative enough, perhaps the following anecdote will elucidate Heschel’s influence. On January 31<sup>st</sup>, 1973, nearly seven years after *Nostra Aetate* and roughly a month before Pope Paul VI passed away, the Pope spoke about the nature of humanity and its relationship with God in front of a large crowd at the Vatican. During this address, the Pope stated, “Even before we have been moved in search of God, God has come in search of us.” Rabbi Marc Tannenbaum argues that Pope Paul’s citation of Heschel’s *God in Search of Man* represented the first time that any Pope publicly addressed and affirmed the teaching of a thinker and writer who was not a Christian!<sup>57</sup> Not only did Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel play a role in shaping the historic *Nostra Aetate* declaration, he also made a lasting impression on the leader of the Catholic Church, with whom he had previously disagreed on critical issues of Catholic-Jewish relations.

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<sup>54</sup> Tannenbaum.

<sup>55</sup> Tannenbaum.

<sup>56</sup> Tannenbaum.

<sup>57</sup> Tannenbaum.

## **Conclusion:**

Ultimately, the final version of the text, including the language on the Jews as well as other non-Christian religions, was overwhelmingly adopted in a vote by the assembled bishops; 2,221 in favor-88 opposed.<sup>58</sup> Though, after it underwent a handful of drafts and edits, Dr. Heschel and the AJC were less than fully satisfied with the final wording of the document. After all this work and dialogue, it is fair to ask, what exactly does this document do? One of the primary AJC leaders in this dialogue, Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum writes in 1983,

“If the declaration falls short of its supporters’ highest hopes, it nevertheless signifies an historic turning point. For the first time, in the history of the 21 Ecumenical Councils, the highest ecclesiastical have committed the Catholic Church throughout the world to uprooting the charge of collective guilt against the Jews, eliminating anti-Semitism and fostering mutual knowledge and respect between Catholics and Jews.”<sup>59</sup>

That is to say, Vatican II certainly did not drive anti-Semitism from the world or even from the hearts of many practicing Catholics. Though this was to be expected! No document could ever accomplish this task! What *Nostra Aetate* did was create good-will and dialogue between the powerful and the victimized, the Catholic Church and the Jew. At the very least, Catholics around the world would have been aware that this conversation between leaders of Catholicism and Judaism was taking place. Perhaps, this would have stirred these individuals to reevaluate their own personal stances. Perhaps Jewish and Catholics neighbors reached out to one another to discuss Vatican II.

Unfortunately, the success of *Nostra Aetate* stood only for a brief moment in time. After Heschel’s era, the Church back-tracked on one of the most crucial elements of the document:

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<sup>58</sup> Tanenbaum.

<sup>59</sup> Tanenbaum.

potential conversion. According to Joshua Furnal's article titled, *Abraham Joshua Heschel and Nostra Aetate: Shaping the Catholic Reconsideration of Judaism during Vatican II*, Furnal writes, "In 2008, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI reintroduced the Tridentine prayer for Good Friday, which says 'illumine [Jewish] hearts, so that they will recognize Jesus Christ, the Savior of all men'. In 2009, the US Bishops issued a statement saying that 'the whole people of Israel' will be included into the Church."<sup>60</sup> Additionally, Furnal adds that "In [2009, Pope] Benedict XVI brought Richard Williamson (a Holocaust denying bishop) back into fold, who was later excommunicated ... by Pope Francis."<sup>61</sup>

Perhaps Soloveitchik was correct! Perhaps it was naïve to believe that three individuals could change the tide of the Church's dishonorable past in regard to Jewish relations. Centuries of conditioning, education and indoctrination could not be overpowered by a few forward-thinking, humanist theologians.

Though hope is not lost all together! The hope for stronger inter-religious relations is held in the hearts of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's students and disciples. With talmidim such as Michael Marmur, Shai Held, Marc Tannenbaum and others, so long as Heschel's students continue to educate and live by his teachings, Heschel's project continues.

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<sup>60</sup> Furnal, Joshua. "Abraham Joshua Heschel and Nostra Aetate: Shaping the Catholic Reconsideration of Judaism during Vatican II." *Religions* 7, no. 6 (2016): 70.

<sup>61</sup> Furnal.

**Chapter Two:**  
**Social Activism**  
*Heschel in Selma*

### **Historical Context:**

From March 21<sup>st</sup> to March 25<sup>th</sup>, 1965, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. led thousands of protestors from Selma, Alabama to the capitol building in Montgomery, Alabama as the culmination of a campaign fighting for voting rights during the Civil Rights era. Just two days before this demonstration was set to begin, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel received an invitation from Dr. King, inviting him to come down to Selma and join the march. Arriving the Sunday of the march, Heschel joined King in the front row of marchers, along with Nobel Peace Prize winner Ralph Bunche and Civil Rights activist and mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr., Ralph Abernathy.<sup>62</sup> This historic moment exemplified the apex of the relationship between Heschel and King: two social activist giants who were both driven by religious motivations. To best understand Heschel's role in this particular moment in the fight for civil rights, we must first investigate the historical context of Selma.

The campaign began in January of 1965 in an attempt to increase African-American voter registration in Selma, Alabama. This city was selected due to its propensity for police brutality, which they hoped would captivate the nation and force President Lyndon B. Johnson and the legislative branch to act. When a state trooper shot and killed a non-violent protestor, 26 year-old church deacon Jimmie Lee Jackson, the activists responded by organizing a march. On March 7<sup>th</sup>, under the leadership of John Lewis, demonstrators marched through the streets of Selma and over the Edmond Pettus Bridge where they were met by crowd of state troopers and local officers. As crowds of white onlookers cheered, the lawmen proceeded to viciously beat the demonstrators and deploy tear gas, even as the protestor retreated. With the nation watching, Martin Luther King attempted to make this same march again only two days later. However,

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<sup>62</sup> Heschel, Susannah: "Theological Affinities in the Writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King, Jr.", *Conservative Judaism*, vol. 50, no.s 2-3 (1998), pp.134



Federal District Court Judge Frank M. Johnson issued a restraining order, making it illegal to march on the bridge until at least March 11<sup>th</sup>. Regardless, King along with nearly 2,000 protestors gathered on March 9<sup>th</sup> and walked across the Edmund Pettus Bridge once again. When the crowd reached the police barricade, following King's lead, the protestors kneeled, prayed, and turn back towards Selma.<sup>63</sup>

King's restraint won the favor of President Johnson, who promised to introduce a bill on voting rights to Congress within a few days. However, that same evening, a white Unitarian minister who traveled down to Selma from Massachusetts named James Reeb was attacked by local whites for his involvement in the protest. He would succumb to his injuries two days later, increasing the death toll in the Selma demonstrations to two and, along with it, generating national concern for this movement. Perhaps this was the tipping point for President Johnson as well. Four days after the death of James Reeb, on March 15<sup>th</sup>, President Johnson spoke these words to Congress: "Their cause must be our cause too. Because it is not just the negroes, but really it is all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome!"<sup>64</sup> The next day, the plan for a march from Selma to Montgomery was submitted to Federal Judge Johnson who approved and insisted that local law enforcement would not stand in the way of the marchers.<sup>65</sup>

Unfortunately, even with the protection of FBI agents and National Guardsmen, one more life would be lost in this non-violent civil protest. The night of March 25<sup>th</sup>, as protestors began to

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<sup>63</sup> "Selma to Montgomery March." Birmingham Campaign | The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute. Accessed October 12, 2018. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/selma-montgomery-march>.

<sup>64</sup> Johnson, "Special Remarks to the Congress: The American Promise," 15 March 1965, in *Public Papers of the Presidents: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1965*, bk. 1, 1966.

<sup>65</sup> "Selma to Montgomery March." Birmingham Campaign | The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute. Accessed October 12, 2018. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/selma-montgomery-march>.

disperse back to their homes, four members of the Ku Klux Klan shot and killed a woman named Viola Liuzzo, who came down from Michigan to Alabama to volunteer.<sup>66</sup>

Ultimately, Heschel recognized that this work was dangerous and involved an inherent risk. Before Heschel ever leaves New York City, two people had lost their lives. Similar to Heschel, Reeb was a white clergyman from a northern state who came down to Alabama to speak truth to power and he paid for it with his life. This tragic story could have just as easily been Heschel. Heschel was not deterred by the threats to his person. He knew he was engaged in a risky business, and yet he remained resolute in his conviction to fight racism.

It is also crucial to recognize just how effective the march in Selma was in the formation of the Voting Rights Act. When President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, he recalled “the outrage of Selma” and called the right to vote “the most powerful instrument ever devised by man for breaking down injustice and destroying the terrible walls which imprison men because they are different from other men.”<sup>67</sup> The march in Selma had become more than just an event; it became a symbol. Dr. King would later note that, “Montgomery led to the Civil Rights Act of 1957 and 1960; Birmingham inspired the Civil Rights Act of 1964; and Selma produced the voting rights legislation of 1965”<sup>68</sup>. The importance of the legislation cannot be over stated. Particularly, section five of the Voting Rights Act, which prohibited specific southern counties from implementing any changes to the voting procedures without first receiving authorization from the United States Attorney General and the

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<sup>66</sup> "Selma to Montgomery March." Birmingham Campaign | The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute. Accessed October 12, 2018. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/selma-montgomery-march>.

<sup>67</sup> Johnson, “Remarks in the Capitol Rotunda at the Signing of the Voting Rights Act,” 6 August 1966, in *Public Papers of the Presidents: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1965*, bk. 2, 1966.

<sup>68</sup> King, Annual Report at the Ninth Annual Convention of SCLC, 11 August 1965, Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers, 1950-1968, Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Inc., Atlanta, GA.

Department of Justice that the changes were nondiscriminatory towards minorities.<sup>69</sup> After the passage of this monumental act, researchers found that in the southern state of North Carolina, “Section 5 coverage increased black voter registration by 14-19 percentage points, white registration by 10-13 percentage points and overall voter turnout by 10-19 percentage points.”<sup>70</sup> One could speculate that because there was a similar increase in the percentage of white and black voters alike, that this could have nullified the impact of such an act. However, the search for African American voting rights was not fought in order to increase the power of an African American voting block or to push a certain political agenda; rather, it was to empower black Americans with a voice that had long been silenced. Heschel found himself on the front lines of a protest that, according to Martin Luther King, Jr. and President Johnson, heavily influenced a piece of United States legislation that called for the equality of the rights of all people under the law.

### **Heschel's Social Activism**

Why exactly, we ask, did Heschel get involved? Heschel is a religious Jew who is deeply moved by the writings of the prophets. It is quite clear that his actions, or deeds, are almost always inspired by some religious motivation. Heschel could also be described as a counter-culturalist and contrarian thinker who regularly took the road less traveled.

In the middle of the twentieth century, most Jewish thinkers were concerned with the two major issues of the day: the Shoah and the establishment of the State of Israel. Rather than comprehensively engaging with these two defining moments of world Jewry in the twentieth century, Heschel chose to get involved with causes that went against the mainstream of Jewish

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<sup>69</sup> "About Section 5 Of The Voting Rights Act." The United States Department of Justice. December 04, 2017. Accessed November 20, 2018. <https://www.justice.gov/crt/about-section-5-voting-rights-act>.

<sup>70</sup> Adriane Fresh, "The Effect of the Voting Rights Act on Enfranchisement: Evidence from North Carolina," *The Journal of Politics* 80, no. 2 (April 2018): 713-718.

consciousness. He did not directly address the Holocaust in his theological writings and said very little about Israel. Although he wrote "Israel: An Echo of Eternity"<sup>71</sup>, the birth and growth of the State of Israel did not prove to be a major focus for Heschel. Perhaps he reasoned that others addressed these elements of Jewish particularity, and he turned his attention to points of convergence between Jews and others - Jews and Christians on one hand and Jews and African Americans on the other. Rather than emphasizing Jewish uniqueness or otherness, Heschel decided to engage with the aspects of Judaism that would build bridges and coalitions.

Heschel begins his engagement with social activism through his involvement with the anti-Vietnam peace movement. He writes in an essay titled, *The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement*:

*"The more deeply immersed I became in the thinking of the prophets, the more powerfully it became clear to me what the lives of the prophets sought to convey: that morally speaking there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings. It also became clear to me that in regard to cruelties committed in the name of a free society, some are guilty, while all are responsible. I did not feel guilty as an individual American for the bloodshed in Vietnam, but I felt deeply responsible. "Thou shalt not stand idly by the blood of thy neighbor (Leviticus 19:15). This is not a recommendation but an imperative, a supreme commandment. And so I decided to change my mode of living and to become active in the cause of peace in Vietnam."*<sup>72</sup>

Though he is specifically speaking about his motivations for getting involved with the anti-war movement during the Vietnam era, this quote can serve to show Heschel's reasoning

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<sup>71</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967.

<sup>72</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. "The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement", *Journal of Social Philosophy*, vol.4 (January 1973), pp.7-8

for social activism in light of human suffering. Heschel's religious worldview created within him the visceral desire to act upon injustice. He returns to phrase, "In a free society, some are guilty, and all are responsible..." a number of times elsewhere in his writing. In essence, he is stating that we are all responsible for the misdoings of our government unless we speak out. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. presents a very similar sentiment when he writes, "To accept passively an unjust system is to cooperate with that system...the oppressed becomes as evil as the oppressor. Not to act communicates to the oppressor that his actions are morally right".<sup>73</sup> Heschel and King believed it was one's religious AND civil duty to take action in the face of injustice. I relate to this sentiment through the prominent rabbinic teaching from Pirkei Avot 2:21, "You are not obligated to finish the work... but neither are you free to desist from it." This offers a different lens to the same imperative: we must act. Even though Heschel was likely aware that he would not live to see the full extent of the results of his actions, he refused to remain silent in the face of discrimination.

In his essay, *The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement*, Heschel identifies three "events" which caused him to shift his life's focus from scholarly pursuits to social activism. Heschel writes,

*"One was the countless onslaughts upon my inner life, depriving me of the ability to sustain inner stillness. The second was the discovery that indifference to evil is worse than evil itself. Even the high worth of reflection in the cultivation of inner truth cannot justify remaining calm in the face of cruelties that make the hope of effectiveness of pure intellectual endeavors seem grotesque... The third event that changed my attitude*

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<sup>73</sup> Heschel, Susannah: "Theological Affinities in the Writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King, Jr.", *Conservative Judaism*, vol. 50, no. 2-3 (1998), pp.138

*was my study of the prophets of ancient Israel, a study on which I worked for several years until its publication in 1962. From them I learned the niggardliness of our moral comprehension, the incapacity to sense the depth of misery caused by our own failures. It became quite clear to me that while our eyes are witness to the callousness and cruelty of man, our heart tries to obliterate the memories, to calm the nerves, and to silence our conscience.”<sup>74</sup>*

This first “event” is less of an event and more of an emotional realization. Heschel had dedicated the majority of life to the pursuit of higher education. He attempted to withdraw from the world and into his study, however, this first identified “event” was his recognition that this way of life was tragically unproductive and did not lead to righteousness. The second event speaks volumes about Heschel’s life experience. Having escaped Nazi occupied Germany, Heschel experienced first-hand the outcomes of having silent neighbors. Rabbi Dr. Michael Marmur comments in his book titled, *Abraham Joshua Heschel and the Sources of Wonder*, “The second event, the realization of the immorality of the bystander, must be seen in terms of his years in Germany and beyond. The events through which he lived made silence impossible.”<sup>75</sup> Heschel writes the profoundly powerful statement that “indifference to evil is worse than evil itself.” In the face of the perceived evil taking place in Selma, Heschel felt the personal responsibility to take action and not allow himself to be indifferent to the prejudices that the African-American community was facing. As for the third event, Heschel claims that his understanding of the prophets led him to action. As the prophetic writings rebuked Israel for their incapacity to emotionally connect with their fellow human beings, Heschel allowed

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<sup>74</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. "The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement", *Journal of Social Philosophy*, vol.4 (January 1973), pp.7-8

<sup>75</sup> Marmur, Michael. *Abraham Joshua Heschel and the Sources of Wonder*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016. Pp 163.

himself to read the text as if the prophets were speaking directly to him. Dr. Marmur writes in reflection to the third event, “As for the third factor in his move to activism, there seems to be little doubt that Heschel drew solace, succor, and inspiration from the example of the prophets of Israel and was thus moved to reach out beyond the confines of his study. With the prophets as his guide, the road leading from the Upper West Side of Manhattan to Selma, Alabama and Washington, DC, was a short one.”<sup>76</sup>

Also found in this essay, Heschel writes, “Although Jewish tradition enjoins our people to obey scrupulously the decrees issued by the government of the land, whenever a decree is unambiguously immoral, one nevertheless has a duty to disobey it.”<sup>77</sup> Again, stated in the context of the Vietnam War, this statement offers insight into Heschel’s thinking about justice and the role of the government. To analyze this comment in the context of Selma, Heschel recognized that the “decree of the land” included discriminatory regulations that limited the voting rights of African Americans in certain southern jurisdictions. He also understood that in Selma, the local authorities were immorally suppressing the African-American community’s right to protest. Heschel felt as if it were his duty to dissent and disobey. In a place where universal suffrage was not the standard, Heschel fought for voting rights because he viewed it as a moral imperative. To use contemporary terms, he believed that one must speak truth to power. He teaches us an important distinction between legal and ethical domains. Heschel believed that when the law was immoral, the law must be changed.

### **Heschel’s Involvement with Dr. King and Selma:**

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<sup>76</sup> Marmur, Michael. *Abraham Joshua Heschel and the Sources of Wonder*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016. Pp 163.

<sup>77</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. "The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement", *Journal of Social Philosophy*, vol.4 (January 1973), pp.7-8

As mentioned previously, Heschel travels to Selma and participates in the march specifically because his presence was requested by Dr. King. We know that King reached out to a number of rabbinic figures and other religious leaders to ask for their partnership at the Selma march as well as other demonstrations.<sup>78</sup> The 1964 CCAR Yearbook provides us a clear example of rabbinic involvement with Dr. King's project of civil rights. The 1964 Report of Committee on Justice and Peace concludes with the following: "In response to a wire sent by Dr. Martin Luther King to the president of the conference, the following colleagues volunteers to travel to St. Augustine, Florida and give evidence of their devotion to the cause of racial injustice: Rabbis Eugene B Borowitz, Balfour Brickner, Israel S Dresner, Daniel Fogel, Jerrold Goldstein, Joel S Goor, [and ten others]."<sup>79</sup> Though Heschel was not a member of the CCAR, we can see how Dr. King's outreach and coalition-building with the Jewish community brought Heschel into the fold. We can conclude that Dr. King viewed the involvement of Jewish leadership – a group of people still viewed as "other" by the American society - as an important function in his organizational model. Yet, we are impelled to ask, how exactly did King and Heschel know each other and why did King identify Heschel as an influential partner?

Heschel's daughter, Dr. Susannah Heschel, writes, "The relationship between the two men began in January 1963, and was a genuine friendship of affection as well as a relationship of two colleagues working together in political causes. As King encouraged Heschel's involvement in the Civil Rights movement, Heschel encouraged King to take a public stance against the war

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<sup>78</sup> Heschel, Susannah: "Theological Affinities in the Writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King, Jr.", *Conservative Judaism*, vol. 50, no.s 2-3 (1998), pp.126-143

<sup>79</sup> "Report of Committee on Justice and Peace." Central Conference of American Rabbis Year Book, p 86. Vol. LXXIV. Atlantic City, NJ: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1964.



in Vietnam.”<sup>80</sup> These men had a mutual admiration for one another, and Dr. Susannah Heschel argues, perhaps they had much more in common than a mutual call to social justice work. In her article, *Theological Affinities in the Writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Susannah Heschel compares the theological motivations of Heschel and King. Among many of the parallels in their thinking, the most profound similarity was their concept of what Heschel calls Divine Pathos. Both men believed that God reacts emotionally to the actions taken by humankind. Susannah Heschel writes, “...Permeating King’s words, the responses of his listeners, and the hymns of the movement, is a fundamental assumption of divine concern with the events that are transpiring in the Civil Rights struggle. God is involved and engaged in that struggle, because God is not remote and transcendent, but possesses subjectivity and is affected by the treatment human beings accord one another. That conviction is central to Heschel’s major theological claim, that the God of the Bible is not impassive, but is a God of pathos who responds to human deeds, suffering with us.”<sup>81</sup> Both Heschel and King are religious men who feel called to work towards social action. This work was not only personally important to them, it also represented a religious deed, in which they were doing the work of God; the holy work of the prophet.

Some believe that while Heschel was involved with the Civil Rights movement, his role at the march in Selma was rather minor. They might argue that the iconic picture<sup>82</sup> of Heschel marching in the front row of protestors with Martin Luther King, Jr. has exaggerated Heschel’s involvement with the March on Selma. His daughter thoroughly disagrees with that sentiment, as she writes, “Selma was a major event in Heschel’s life. A few days before the march was able

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<sup>80</sup> Heschel, Susannah: “Theological Affinities in the Writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King, Jr.”, *Conservative Judaism*, vol. 50, no.s 2-3 (1998), pp.126-143

<sup>81</sup> Heschel, Susannah: “Theological Affinities in the Writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King, Jr.”, *Conservative Judaism*, vol. 50, no.s 2-3 (1998), pp.126-143

<sup>82</sup> Picture of Heschel at Selma. Courtesy of Susannah Heschel.

to take place, in mid-March 1965, Heschel led a delegation of eight hundred people protesting the brutal treatment the demonstrators were receiving in Selma to FBI headquarters in New York City. There had been violence against the demonstrators in Selma, and they had been prevented for two months from beginning to march. The New York delegation was not permitted to enter the FBI building, but Heschel was allowed inside, surrounded by sixty police officers, to present a petition to the regional FBI director.”<sup>83</sup> This goes to show that Heschel was not simply showing up in Selma because his friend Martin Luther King asked him to come. Rather, Heschel was aware of the attempts to make this march for months and fought on its behalf even before he came down to Alabama. This sentiment is very important in combatting any accusation that Heschel was an opportunist. He did not show up in Selma to increase his social status, sell more books or grow his network of activist; rather, he was involved with the demonstrations in Selma from the early stages because he genuinely and passionately cared about this societal issue.

### **After the March:**

Heschel appears to have been deeply moved by his experience of marching with Dr. King in Selma. His daughter recalls that, “Shortly after returning from the march, he wrote to King: ‘The day we marched together out of Selma was a day of sanctification. That day I hope will never be past to me—that day will continue to be this day. A great Hasidic sage compares the service of God to a battle being waged in war. An army consists of infantry, artillery, and cavalry. In critical moments cavalry and artillery may step aside from the battle-front. Infantry, however, carries the brunt. I am glad to belong to infantry! May I add that I have rarely in my life been privileged to hear a sermon as glorious as the one you delivered at the service in Selma

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<sup>83</sup> Heschel, Susannah: “Theological Affinities in the Writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King, Jr.”, *Conservative Judaism*, vol. 50, no.s 2-3 (1998), pp.126-143

prior to the march’.”<sup>84</sup> There is much to unpack in this short excerpt. First, Heschel refers to his experience as “a day of sanctification”. Through his word choice, we can feel this sense of religiosity to what he was doing. He goes on to associate their project to be “the service of God”. This is very on message for Heschel, as his theological writings speak of the role of humanity as fulfilling God’s will. Heschel also writes that he considers himself and Dr. King to be in the metaphorical infantry of the battle for civil rights. Clearly Heschel does not view his role to be minor or auxiliary; rather, he very much identifies himself as someone who has got his elbows down in the mud and really taking on the burden of the challenges literally on the frontlines of the battle for racial justice. Lastly, by complimenting King on his sermon, Heschel relates to King on a level that illustrates who Heschel truly was; a rabbi, a poet, a gifted orator, a champion of inter-faith relations and a warm loving man. Heschel was drawn to King not only because of the content of his mission, but also because of the rhetorical style of his message. They were both blessed with a prophetic drive and as well as a poetic gift.

When Heschel returned from Selma, he wrote the following in his diary.

*“I thought of having walked with Hasidic rabbis on various occasions. I felt a sense of the Holy in what I was doing. Dr. King expressed several times to me his appreciation. He said, ‘I cannot tell you how much your presence means to us. You cannot imagine how often Reverend [C.T.] Vivian and I speak about you.’ Dr. King said to me that this was the greatest day in his life and the most important civil rights demonstration... I felt again what I have been thinking about for years—that Jewish religious institutions have again missed a great opportunity, namely, to interpret a civil-*

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<sup>84</sup> Heschel, Susannah: “Theological Affinities in the Writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King, Jr.”, *Conservative Judaism*, vol. 50, no.s 2-3 (1998), pp.126-143

*rights movement in terms of Judaism. The vast majority of Jews participating actively in it are totally unaware of what the movement means in terms of the prophetic traditions.*"<sup>85</sup>

This window into the soul of Rabbi Heschel offers us an insight into the reverence with which he and Martin Luther King held for one another. We also see Heschel the thinker, the man who could step back and objectively assess the Jewish community as a whole. He wanted more Jews to get involved and for the Jews who were involved to better understand how they were actually living out Jewish values.

### **Backlash:**

According to Rabbi Malcom Stern, Southern rabbis played important roles in race relations during the 1950s.<sup>86</sup> Of course, there was almost always opposition from some faction of the congregation when a rabbi got involved in the civil rights movement. As painful as it is to admit, there were certainly white bigots in the pews of Jewish congregations. Many other congregants feared for their own safety as being "a friend to the black community" carried with it the risk of violence. Rabbi Stern sites that "...colleagues like Jacob Rothschild in Atlanta, Perry Nussbaum in Jackson, Mississippi, and Milton Schlager in Meridian, Mississippi, had to contend with the bombing of their synagogues by bigots."<sup>87</sup> These Southern rabbis understood the potential price they paid for getting involved in race relations in the South. In a lecture

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<sup>85</sup> Heschel, Susannah: "Theological Affinities in the Writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Conservative Judaism*, vol. 50, no.s 2-3 (1998), pp.126-143

<sup>86</sup> Malcolm H. Stern, "The Role of the Rabbi in the South," in *"Turn to the South": Essays on Southern Jewry*, ed. Nathan M. Kaganoff and Melvin I. Urofsky (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1979).

<sup>87</sup> Malcolm H. Stern, "The Role of the Rabbi in the South," in *"Turn to the South": Essays on Southern Jewry*, ed. Nathan M. Kaganoff and Melvin I. Urofsky (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1979).

delivered in Atlanta in the context of a Southern Jewish History course, Professor Dr. Mark Bauman claimed that many of the Southern rabbis resented their Northern colleagues, who would come down to the South for a weekend to take part in protests or demonstrations and then “retreat back home to New York.”<sup>88</sup> He claimed that these Southern rabbis, many of whom had congregants on both sides of major issues, had to live with the implications of these Northern rabbis’ actions.

One might have argued that Rabbi Heschel, a Rabbi residing in New York City, represented one such northern rabbi. However, his mission was not to come down to Alabama to rebuke the Jews of that region. Rather, in his mind, he was there because he viewed it as his responsibility to take action against immorality. Now, we can be critical of Heschel, stating that he came to Selma for a couple of days, and returned home without fully understanding the extent of the consequences that Alabama Jews would face because of his involvement. That being said, the Jewish community in Alabama did not appear to be the target of violence or hate crimes following the march on Selma.

Rabbi Perry Nussbaum, a Reform rabbi and leader in civil rights era in Mississippi wrote an article published in the CCAR Journal in October of 1963 which speaks directly to this conflict. Rabbi Nussbaum writes passionately about the many southern clergy members who lost their jobs because of their alignment with the civil rights movement. He goes on to make this statement, “So many of long standing...ejected so fast... there is no fooling around with white supremacist members who are “out to get” the pastor... Do you understand what went on in this capital city of the Deep South, you in the North who from the security of your own kehillahs

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<sup>88</sup> Bauman, Mark. "Session XV - Rabbi Dr. David Marx." Lecture, A Tale of Two Cities: Atlanta & Savannah, The Temple, Atlanta, August 8, 2018.

were quick to advise and consent about our leadership?”<sup>89</sup> It is not entirely clear if Rabbi Nussbaum was opposed to having Northern rabbis come down to the South to work towards social change. However, he makes the point that the majority of Northerners were out of touch with the Southern milieu. As someone who was so adamant about working for the equality of man, it is hard to believe that Rabbi Nussbaum would consider Rabbi Heschel’s presence at Selma a problem. He addresses this point more directly when he writes, “Strengthen [my] hands by colleagues coming to town for demonstrations? The colleague and the expert, so blandly reassuring in his prophecy as set down in social justice writ, has still to learn some hard facts of life about rabbis and small congregations.”<sup>90</sup> Again, Nussbaum is not necessarily being critical of Northern rabbis who want to take action; he is simply stating that there are complexities involved in this work of which the Northern clergy members are unaware of.

In 1964, just months before the march in Selma, rabbis from the Central Conference of American Rabbis, including Rabbi Perry Nussbaum, held a forum on the topic of civil rights which was recorded in the 1964 volume of the CCAR Year Book. Rabbi Harold L. Gelfman opened the conversation by stating, “I have my doubts about demonstrations in the South by Northern rabbis...even those of Southern rabbis...” To this, Rabbi Carl I. Miller voiced his opinion; “I believe it is a valid role for the rabbi to demonstrate when he has critically evaluated the situation. The March on Washington was a great demonstration. There are others when I refused. It is a valid role, but it must be used with discretion...” With this sentiment in mind, one can assert that Rabbi Miller would have found Heschel’s involvement appropriate due to his diligence in understanding the issue. Heschel did not arrive in Selma unacquainted with the

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<sup>89</sup> Nussbaum, Perry E. "And Then There Was One - In the Capital City of Mississippi." *Central Conference of American Rabbis*, October 1963, 15-19.

<sup>90</sup> Nussbaum, Perry E. "And Then There Was One - In the Capital City of Mississippi." *Central Conference of American Rabbis*, October 1963, 15-19.

historical context of this particular demonstration, rather, he had been involved for quite some time. This discussion at the conference, at least in the formal minutes, ended with the prophetic words of Rabbi Edward Zerin, who concluded, “We shall not cease our labors, whatever they may be, whether in the North or in the South, until every man shall live as a free man in a world of peace.”<sup>91</sup> These stirring words leave us with the feeling that, overall, while the members CCAR may have disagreed on how and when to take action, there was an understanding that working towards civil rights was worthy and righteous work.

### **Echo of Heschel in Our Time:**

Abraham Joshua Heschel provides for us a perfect case study in which we can analyze the complexities of addressing civil rights in the American South in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A believer in divine pathos, depth theology and prophetic Judaism, Heschel marched in Selma because he felt that God was pained by the suffering of the African Americans, that all human beings are created equal and that the Judaism instructs us to act in the face of discrimination. Although Jews were not victims, at least on a large scale, of racial oppression in the United States, Heschel wanted to make sure that Jews would not become bystanders.

To take Heschel seriously, we need to contemplate how to respond to injustices in our lives. Racism is still very much alive despite the Voting Act. A completely disproportionate number of African American males are in the prison system. There are still appalling gaps in education, income, political leadership, and power between white and black Americans. Heschel helped lead the march to Selma, but the march has yet to realize its goal of racial justice.

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<sup>91</sup> “Civil Rights Recorder’s Report.” Central Conference of American Rabbis Year Book, p 251. Vol. LXXIV. Atlantic City, NJ: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1964.

We can't help but contemplating: if Heschel were alive today, what issues would he champion and what avenues would he take to create change? Would he be compelled to get involved with climate change organizations? Combat gun violence in America? The challenges presented by migrant children and deportation? The rise of Anti-Semitism in the world? Combatting suicide? Women's rights? Religious pluralism in Israel? Israel in general? Would he recognize that there is still a great deal of work to be done fighting for civil rights for African-Americans? There was certainly no less suffering in the world during Heschel's era... how did he decide where to focus his efforts? If we were to let Heschel's theology and thinking influence us, what should we fight for?



**Chapter Three:**  
**Theology**  
*Heschelian Thought*

### **Heschel's Theology Chapter**

Abraham Joshua Heschel was first and foremost a theologian. He wrote extensively in an effort to help Jews and non-Jews understand the meaning of a life with God. Specifically, Heschel believed in a God who searches for us as we search for God. This chapter seeks to explore the aspects of his theology that are emblematic or distinctive if not unique to Heschel. Some of these concepts are not necessarily altogether specific to Heschel, but rather represent a “Heschelian” lens to a more broadly discussed topic. For example, Heschel is far from the only Jewish theologian to write on the topic of mitzvot, however, his understanding is quite unique and worthy of illumination.

#### **Divine Pathos:**

Heschel's primary theological claim, the foundation for which most of his theology stands, is the concept of divine pathos. This is the idea that God is intimately involved in the world and has an emotional response to the actions taken by the beings God created. Heschel's God is anthropopathic, a God who feels love and pain, joy and anger. To imitate God, then, is a person who is empathetic, whose emotions are deep and who is willing to be vulnerable.

God should not be thought of in Aristotelian terms as the “Unmoved Mover” – the being that created the world and then stepped away to let things unfold as they may. Aristotle's God is unaffected by the chronicle of history or human action and is thought of primarily as a creator. Rather, Heschel asserts that God is the “Most Moved Mover” – one who is emotionally stirred and stimulated, reacting in anger or delight to humanity's deeds. God cares and actively participates in the world throughout history.

Heschel writes, “God does not simply command and expect obedience; he is also moved and affected by what happens in the world and he reacts accordingly. Events and human actions arouse in him joy or sorrow, pleasure or wrath. He is not conceived as judging facts so to speak

‘objectively,’ in detached impassivity. He reacts in an intimate and subjective manner, and thus determines the value of events.”<sup>92</sup> Through divine pathos does humanity have a relationship with God, for God is not detached from history. Heschel depicts a God who is a sort of hybrid between transcendent – completely removed from the world – and immanent – found in the material world. God cannot be exclusively transcendent because God has a vested interest and emotional connection to humanity, and yet, God cannot be fully immanent, for Heschel believes God’s actions are limited due to humanity’s free will.

For some, the idea of a God who has human emotions creates a sharp theological problem. Some argue that this anthropomorphizes God. By ascribing human emotions to God, are we not simply projecting our own emotions onto the divine? Heschel was aware of this risk but believed there was an even bigger risk in believing in a God who has no emotion.

Heschel argues God’s anger is an important part of the biblical narrative. Is it even possible to read the Bible without acknowledging that God reacts to humanity’s disobediences? Is not God angry when the Israelites build a golden calf? In his article, *Divine Pathos*, Heschel writes, “God’s anger is conditioned by God’s will and aroused by man’s sins; it can be dissipated by the ‘return’ of the people. Divine wrath is not opposed to love, but rather its counterpart. It is the very evidence of God’s love. Only because God loves his people is God capable of being kindled with anger against them. God’s love, justice, and wrath are part of the same structure.”<sup>93</sup> That is to say, God’s anger or pain is a sign that God cares about us. When you care about someone, it hurts to watch them hurt. When you love somebody, you get angry when you see them make poor choices. If God were incapable of having emotions, God would have zero

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<sup>92</sup> "The Divine Pathos: The Basic Category of Prophetic Theology", *Judaism*, vol.2, no.1 (January 1953), pp.61-67.

<sup>93</sup> "The Divine Pathos: The Basic Category of Prophetic Theology", *Judaism*, vol.2, no.1 (January 1953), pp.61-67.

regard for humanity. This conception of God is not anthropomorphic; rather, it is anthropopathic. This is an important distinction, for if God can be anthropomorphized, it would be difficult to challenge Christianity's claim that Jesus is the human form of God. Whereas anthropomorphic conceptions of the divine are unacceptable in Jewish thought, Heschel's anthropopathic conception does not create the same theological challenge as a God who takes on human, or any form.

### **Understanding of the Prophets:**

The prophet must be aware of the divine pathos in order to discern God's will. Traditional conceptions of a prophet are one who can prophesize and act as the mouthpiece of God. However, this is not Heschel's understanding of the prophet. He writes, "What is characteristic of the prophet is not foreknowledge of the future but insight into the present pathos of God."<sup>94</sup> In this way, the prophet must live with a sort of dual perspective: his own particular view of the world and the ability to view the world from the perspective of God. For example, a person sees a shirt in the store and admires the beauty of this piece of clothing. The prophet, on the other hand, may appreciate the aesthetics of the item, but can't help but ask, "Who had to suffer in order for this shirt to come into being?" The prophet is not a seer as much as a person who possesses insight - who looks into nature and sees the supernatural, who can feel God's presence and make sense of God's essence.

If divine pathos is the grounds on which providence and prophecy stand, then prophetic Judaism is the starting point of Heschel's social activism. Heschel claims that the prophets of the Hebrew Bible teach us that when we are aware of suffering, it is incumbent upon us to take

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<sup>94</sup> "The Divine Pathos: The Basic Category of Prophetic Theology", *Judaism*, vol.2, no.1 (January 1953), pp.61-67.

action. Heschel perfectly synthesizes the idea of pathos, prophetic Judaism and action in the following excerpt:

*“Pathos is not, however, to be understood as mere feeling. Pathos is an act formed with intention, depending on free will, the result of decision and determination. The divine pathos is the theme of the prophetic mission. The aim of the prophet is to reorient the people by communicating to them the divine pathos which, by impelling the people to ‘return’, it itself transformed. Even ‘In the moment of anger’ (Jer. 18:7), what God intends is not that his anger should be executed but that it should be appeased and annulled by the people’s repentance.”*<sup>95</sup>

Thus, the prophet, aware of God’s suffering or anger – both of which are embedded in love-attempts to rebuke society in hopes that it might change. In this way, the prophet serves an intermediary between the people and God; however, not in the sense that the prophet is the mouthpiece of God. Heschel’s prophet does not speak the words of God, rather, speaks on behalf of God’s pathos and will.

This is precisely what Heschel attempted to do in his own life; to hear and invoke God’s pathos on racism and inter-faith relations in America. He was an interpreter, a translator of God’s will. The societal treatment of African-Americans caused God to feel anger. The Catholic Church’s relations with Judaism caused God to feel pain. In an attempt to alleviate that pain and anger, Heschel called for repentance and modification of behavior.

### **Covenantal Relationship – God in Search of Man**

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<sup>95</sup> "The Divine Pathos: The Basic Category of Prophetic Theology", *Judaism*, vol.2, no.1 (January 1953), pp.61-67

In one of Abraham Joshua Heschel's signature works of Jewish theology, Heschel believes that God is in search of man. This is in contrast to most theological thought, in which humanity is seeking to be in relation with God. Rather, Heschel asserts, "All of human history as described in the Bible may be summarized in one phrase: God is in search of man. Faith in God is a response to God's question."<sup>96</sup> We are compelled to ask, why is God, the most supreme being above all other beings, reaching out for a connection to human beings?

As he writes in *Man is Not Alone*, "His need 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."<sup>97</sup> Does this mean that God cannot act except through humanity? Not exactly. Rather than thinking of humanity as God's channel of engaging with the world, we should conceive of God and humanity as being partners in the unfolding of history. God's act of creation is not an event, but rather a process, an ongoing process that requires covenantal relationship between the divine and humanity. As Heschel explains,

*"The work of Creation is intentionally left unfinished so that humans may come along to complete the task. Israel is the partner of God; the life of sacred deeds, mitzvot in the most broadly defined sense, is the vehicle of that partnership. Israel is also the partner of Shabbat, bringing God's own rest into this-worldly reality. Partnership is presented as God willfully and generously extending Himself to humanity, inviting us to come along on the great journey of perfecting God's universe."*<sup>98</sup>

From this perspective, God needs us, and therefore is searching for a connection with man.

Heschel explains that because God is in search of man, man ought to be in search of God. How

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<sup>96</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955. P 136.

<sup>97</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion*, Farrar, Straus & Young (New York) / Jewish Publication Society of America (Philadelphia), 1951. P 243.

<sup>98</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion*, Farrar, Straus & Young (New York) / Jewish Publication Society of America (Philadelphia), 1951. P 243.

do we do this? Heschel explains in the previous quote when he writes, "...the life of sacred deeds, mitzvot in the most broadly defined sense, is the vehicle of that partnership."<sup>99</sup>

The Deed, or the performance of mitzvot, is the single most important element in fostering a connection with God. Mitzvot are, in short, expressions of the divine will of God and God gave us the mitzvot because he wants us to be in relation with him. The way we come in contact with God is through the performance of mitzvot; the manifestation of God's will.

Furthermore, Heschel's conception of the "the Deed" entails that Jews take a leap of action before they make a leap of faith. There is an underlying assumption that since the mitzvot express God's will and that by following them, even if without a full cognitive understanding, the action itself will be worthy and holy. For example, before one understands and appreciates the act of keeping kosher as an element of faith, one should simply begin the practice of keeping kosher. The action of performing the mitzvah, in Heschel's understanding, is much more important than one's personal connection to the commandment. Why do this? Heschel explains, "To surpass one's needs, to do more than one understands in order to understand more than one already does."<sup>100</sup> It is crucial to note that even though Heschel was innovative and radical as a theologian, he was traditional in his Jewish practice. He was a halachic Jew, who interpreted the reasons for keeping the mitzvot in an unorthodox manner, but whose commitment to keeping the mitzvot was orthodox. Heschel's ultimate religious goal is not personal meaning, growth or understanding, rather, it is to be in search of God and to foster the connection as God searches for you.

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<sup>99</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion*, Farrar, Straus & Young (New York) / Jewish Publication Society of America (Philadelphia), 1951. P 243.

<sup>100</sup> Marmur, Michael. Quote attributed to Abraham Joshua Heschel. "Divine Pathos and Wonder." Lecture, August 29, 2018.

This says quite a lot about Heschel's conception of humanity's place in the universe. In a rare tv interview, Heschel explains the relationship between God and man. "Man is terribly important", claims Heschel, "...which is surprising! Shouldn't God be more concerned about cosmic energy and astronauts' techniques... No, he is concerned about widows and orphans in Jerusalem. MY LORD, this is beneath your dignity! You, God of the universe, are concerned with the poor? With the disadvantaged? Yes he is! Man is very important to God."<sup>101</sup> Heschel claims that it is counter-intuitive that God has great concern for humanity. Why would God care about a person begging on the corner or the business woman who is down on her luck? First and foremost, because God has pathos. God is not distant from humanity; in contrast, God is emotionally invested in each individual. Secondly, we are necessary partners in creation and God is counting on us. Whether we are suffering, content or causing suffering, God is in search of man.

### **Radical Amazement / Wonder:**

Wonder – one of Heschel's most fundamental theological terms – can be equated to the awareness of God. Heschel understands that God fills the world and is present in all of creation. Rather than being in relationship with God, the experience of wonder, or radical amazement, is sensing God's connection to us and everything around us. Heschel writes, "Awareness of God does not come by degrees: from timidity to intellectual temerity; from guesswork, reluctance, to certainty; it is not a decision reached as the crossroads of doubt. It comes when, drifting in the wilderness; having gone astray, we suddenly behold the immutable polar star. Out of endless anxiety, out of denial and despair, the soul bursts out in speechless crying."<sup>102</sup> If God is found in

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<sup>101</sup> Interview with Carl Stern, (New York) Jewish Theological Seminary, 1972.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FEXK9xcRCho&t=1073s>

<sup>102</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion*, Farrar, Straus & Young (New York) / Jewish Publication Society of America (Philadelphia), 195. p75



all of creation, then humans have the capacity to experience wonder at almost every moment. However, we must be awake spiritually in order to experience the wonder of all that lives and breathes. As humans grow and mature, we become accustomed to the constant miracles that surround us. We do not experience wonder every time we see a flower or hear a good song. We have the cognitive ability of sight but have lost the spiritual facility to have insight. Heschel writes in *God in Search of Man*:

*“Our systems of education stress the importance of enabling the student to exploit the power aspect of reality. To some degree, they try to develop his ability to appreciate beauty. But there is no education for the sublime. We teach children how to measure, how to weigh. We fail to teach them how to revere, how to sense wonder and awe.”*<sup>103</sup>

On the other hand, infants are constantly experiencing a form radical amazement. Every new noise, smell and cognitive perception is an astonishing experience and represents something they cannot fully grasp. Young children are, in a sense, constantly discovering the world and therefore can be amazed by it.

Heschel would argue that the example of the infant expanding its conception of the universe is similar yet not altogether identical as experiencing true wonder. In his book, *Man is Not Alone*, Heschel explains that, “Radical amazement has a wider scope than any other act of man. While any act of perception or cognition has as its object a selected segment of reality, radical amazement refers to all of reality; not only to what we see, but also to the very act of seeing as well as to our own selves, to the selves that see and are amazed at their ability to see.”<sup>104</sup> To engage with radical amazement does require of an individual to leave the realm of

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<sup>103</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955. p 36

<sup>104</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion*, Farrar, Straus & Young (New York) / Jewish Publication Society of America (Philadelphia), 1951. P 13.

reason altogether. However, Heschel introduces the concept of the “Ineffable”; the indescribable and ultimately unknowable essence of the universe. You know that it is there...but it is simply inexpressible and beyond the grasp of reason. Heschel argues, “We do not have to go to the end of reasoning to encounter it. The ineffable is...something with which we are confronted everywhere and at all times. Even the very act of thinking baffles our thinking, just as every intelligible fact is, by virtue of being a fact, drunk with baffling aloofness.”<sup>105</sup> Heschel is taking issue with an established philosophical structure that places doubt at the center of philosophy. Heschel claims, that doubt matters, but wonder is more primal; more fundamental. Wonder is something more basic, because I cannot doubt that I am capable of doubting. On the other hand, I express wonder at my capacity to wonder. As Soloveitchik might frame it, I am confronted by my own cognizance.<sup>106</sup> Humans are self-aware and can metaphorically take step back and think to themselves, “I am aware of my own existence. I can experience wonder and be amazed at the universe. It is amazing that I am even able to have this thought! I am amazed at my ability to be amazed!”

The concept of radical amazement and the ineffable are not theories that we can understand through academic study; rather we must experience them. Encountering the ineffable or being in a state of radical amazement are expressions of how an individual can come to experience God. Heschel attempts to capture this experience in words, by stating,

*“...A moment comes like a thunderbolt, in which a flash of the undisclosed rends our dark apathy asunder. It is full of overpowering brilliance, like a point in which all moments of life are focused or a thought which outweighs all thoughts ever conceived*

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<sup>105</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion*, Farrar, Straus & Young (New York) / Jewish Publication Society of America (Philadelphia), 1951. P 13.

<sup>106</sup> Soloveitchik, Joseph B. “CONFRONTATION.” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 6, no. 2 (1964): 5–29.

*of...The ineffable has shuddered itself into the soul. It has entered our consciousness like a ray of light passing into a lake. Refraction of that penetrating ray brings about a turning in our mind: We are penetrated by his insight. We cannot think any more as if he were there and we here. He is both there and here. He is not a being but being in and beyond all beings.”<sup>107</sup>*

Heschel presents us with a metaphysical paradox. It is seemingly impossible for something to be in two places at the same time. Yet, Heschel claims that in moments of wonder, God is simultaneously existing with in me and outside of me. God is not a separate being, like a neighbor who greets me from across the street; rather, God is in me, in my neighbor, in the street, in the temporal moment of the greeting and permeates throughout the entire universe.

### **Holiness in Time:**

One of Heschel’s most well-known quotes claims that, “The Sabbath is like a palace in time”; meaning, the hours that constitute Shabbat are inherently sacred and that Shabbat is qualitatively more substantial than any other day. Heschel attributes holiness to the concept of time rather than to objects, individuals or places. He creates a polarity between the realm of space and the realm of time. Heschel explains, “Technical civilization is man’s conquest of space. It is a triumph frequently achieved by sacrificing an essential ingredient of existence, namely, time. In technical civilization, we expend time to gain space. To enhance our power in the world of space is our main objective. Yet to have more does not mean to be more. The power we attain in the world of space terminates abruptly at the borderline of time. But time is the heart of existence.”<sup>108</sup> If time is the heart of existence, then Shabbat, the most sacred of times, is the

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<sup>107</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion*, Farrar, Straus & Young (New York) / Jewish Publication Society of America (Philadelphia), 1951. p13. p78

<sup>108</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*, Farrar, Straus & Young (New York), 1951.

focus of the heart; the ultimate purpose of existence. Through the study of Jewish sources, Heschel claims that time is sanctified, however that does not mean that individuals should entirely disengage from the realm of space. Heschel presents two poles – time and space – and encourages us to engage with both, and yet prioritizes the importance of time over space.

Judaism certainly attributes holiness to the realm of space. Was Moses not a holy individual? Is the Torah scroll or a mezuzah not a sacred text? Is Jerusalem not hallowed ground? Heschel does not question whether or not these people, places and things are considered holy. Rather, he proclaims that time is even more so! He expounds on this when he writes in *The Sabbath*, “The higher goal of spiritual living is not to amass a wealth of information, but to face sacred moments. In a religious experience, for example, it is not a thing that imposes itself on man but a spiritual presence. What is retained in the soul is the moment of insight rather than the place where the act came to pass. A moment of insight is a fortune, transporting us beyond the confines of measured time.”<sup>109</sup> We are compelled to ask, what makes something holy? Does humanity ascribe holiness to things or is holiness innate in certain spaces and times? Heschel argues, that God is the one who makes things holy.

Shabbat is holy because God declared it to be so, as it is written, “God blessed the seventh day and made it holy.”<sup>110</sup> Heschel asks, “Now what was the first holy object in the history of the world? Was it a mountain? Was it an altar? It is, indeed, a unique occasion at which the distinguished word [*kadosh*] is used for the first time: in the Book of Genesis at the end of the story of creation. How extremely significant is the fact that it is applied to time: ‘*and God blessed the seventh day and made it holy.*’ There is no reference in the record of creation to

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<sup>109</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*, Farrar, Straus & Young (New York), 1951.

<sup>110</sup> Genesis 2:3

any object in space that would be endowed with the quality of holiness.”<sup>111</sup> This close reading analysis of the biblical verse is very typical of Heschel’s thinking. Nearly all of Heschel’s theological conceptions are based in biblical or rabbinic sources, and yet he is incredibly innovative and radically departs from the thinking of other Jewish theologians. Heschel continues, “This is a radical departure from accustomed religious thinking. The mythical mind would expect that, after heaven and earth have been established, God would create a holy place – a holy mountain or a holy spring – whereupon a sanctuary is to be established. Yet it seems as if to the Bible, it is *holiness in time*, the Sabbath, which comes first.”<sup>112</sup> Heschel relies on the classical sources of Judaism, which he mastered entirely, and yet he remains creative and generative of new ideas.

### **Conclusion of Chapter:**

Although not entirely comprehensive, these five elements of Heschel’s theology represent the basic tenets of his faith. Ultimately, faith – or belief – is the principal component of his religious thought. Heschel does not ask, “Does God exist?”, rather he ponders, “How does God exist?”. He believes in a God who feels emotions and searches for a connection with each individual. Heschel understands that a prophet is somehow who can identify those emotions and enact God’s will in the world. Heschel’s theology heavily influenced his decision to engage in inter-religious dialogue with the Catholic Church. Heschel’s understanding of the prophets compelled him to become a social activist. It is Heschel’s theology that motivated the majority his actions and engagements; and these deeds make him worthy of being regarded as a modern-day prophet.

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<sup>111</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*, Farrar, Straus & Young (New York), 1951.

<sup>112</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*, Farrar, Straus & Young (New York), 1951.

# **Conclusion**

### Conclusion

Five years ago, sitting on a park bench in Jerusalem, I thumbed my way through a short book by Abraham Joshua Heschel. I did not know it then, but those pages were a catalyst to a journey of discovery and contemplation. In pursuit of defining my Jewish practice, Heschel's thinking usually impacted my own. I agree with much of what he writes, and still there are aspects of his theology that I am not quite ready to accept. I believe that God is searching for a relationship with me, though, I am not convinced that adherence to the mitzvot is the path to God. I am moved by the idea that God is emotionally connected to the experience of humanity, yet, I would prefer a God who takes action against injustice rather than being saddened by man's distress. For someone who said of himself, "I am a brand plucked from the fire, in which my people were burned to death..."<sup>113</sup>, I wish he expounded more on the topics of the Shoah and theodicy.

As I continued to engage with Heschel, I recognized that he was no ordinary man; he was a twentieth century prophet. To what degree did he live out his life as a prophet? Heschel had a particularly empathetic soul and was pained by the suffering of human beings. His daughter, Susannah Heschel remembers that near the end of his life, he was so disturbed by the Vietnam war that he regularly lost sleep. He would be up, walking around their home in the middle of the night, close to tears in his outrage against the destruction of life.<sup>114</sup>

Heschel had a special ability to tap into divine pathos and the courage to act in the face of injustice. His efforts protesting the Vietnam war and time spent with Martin Luther King, Jr.

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<sup>113</sup> Kasimow, Harold & Sherwin, Byron L. (ed.s), *No Religion Is An Island: Abraham Joshua Heschel and Interreligious Dialogue*, Orbis Books (Maryknoll NY), 1991.

<sup>114</sup> Heschel, Susannah: "Theological Affinities in the Writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King, Jr.", *Conservative Judaism*, vol. 50, no.s 2-3 (1998), pp.134

in Selma are but two instances in which Heschel proved that he was not only an expert on ancient prophets; he was also driven to internalize the prophetic voice and express it in his own cultural context. He had the morale resolve to speak truth to power. His communications with president John F. Kennedy, MLK, Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI represent his political influence and position in society. Heschel spent his last few years on this earth attempting to heal the soul of the country and rebuking society as to alleviate the suffering of man and God. If ever there lived a man who was worthy of being deemed a prophet, it was Abraham Joshua Heschel.

Learning about Heschel has truly been a transformative experience. Social activism has always been important to me, but never before could I explain why. In light of my engagement with Heschel, social activism has taken on a religious and spiritual significance. For a man who experienced so much hate and whose life was upended by the Shoah, Heschel is generally described as being incredibly warm and kind. He was a living paradigm of love conquering hate and hesed triumphing over evil. Heschel has become more than an academic writer who I am studying; he has become my mentor. He speaks to me through his books, his beliefs and his actions. He taught me to be unapologetic in my faith and, at the same time, to be open and accepting of each person's convictions. Heschel was the embodiment of one of my favorite rabbinic texts. "Ben Zoma says: Who is wise? One who learns from all men, as it is said, I have acquired understanding from all my teachers."<sup>115</sup> Heschel was a teacher to many and had many teachers. He learned lessons from his Hasidic upbringing, his secular education, his engagement in inter-faith dialogue and his work in the civil rights era. His depth theology- the understanding that all human beings are created by God and are equal due simply to the nature of their humanity – is poignant and speaks to my soul.

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<sup>115</sup> Pirkei Avot 4:1



We would be remiss if we did not mention both the timeliness and timelessness of Abraham Joshua Heschel. As an activist, he confronted two of the most difficult challenges of his day; civil inequality and the Vietnam War. As a scholar, he developed a Jewish lens, based on his understanding of the prophets, from which to view the world. As a rabbi, he accomplished great learning and then translated his learning into living a life of action. Heschel brought many gifts to this world, and yet, racism, interfaith relations and the place of God in our lives all remain unresolved issues. In his life, Heschel demonstrated the truth of the Mishnaic saying, that although we cannot finish the work or solve the problem, we are also not free to desist from it. May we all have the strength to face the existential problems of our own time with the same courage, poise and dedication as Heschel did. This man gives me courage and hope. He recognized that while the prophet has a specific role to play in the improvement of society, each individual still has a responsibility to right the wrongs in our world. God is not searching for any one particular person... God is searching for everyone. I am grateful that God searched for and found Abraham Joshua Heschel; and vice versa.

Heschel concludes his book, *God in Search of Man*, with the poetic words of the prophet Isaiah.<sup>116</sup> Accordingly, I thought it fitting to conclude this thesis with a poem inspired by the writing of Abraham Joshua Heschel.

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<sup>116</sup> Isaiah 62:6-7

El Shaddai, you spoke to me in the desert.  
Wonder, like lightning, strikes unexpectedly.  
Under the stars and waning moon, you spoke.  
I could not understand, but I heard you clearly.  
“Lift yourself. You are protected. I am the creator and you, the designer.”  
In the silence of the night, my anger called out to you.  
El Shaddai!! How can this be? Is the world truly according to your will?  
Your tragic seasons continue to unfold and I find myself asking...  
Is this a test? What do you want from us? This cannot be your will!  
Shall we patiently wait under your protection?  
Shall we pray with our feet?  
Show us how the hopeless wanderer can heal this world.  
Speechless.  
You spoke to us in the desert.  
If only we could comprehend.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Written by Zachary Goodman (unpublished)

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