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ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL: RECASTING HASIDISM FOR MODERNS

Abraham Joshua Heschel is generally seen as an American Jewish religious thinker. When he is taught, it is primarily in the context of American Judaism. His mature works were published here, and his greatest impact was on Americans, Christians as well as Jews. In the public realm, Heschel is best remembered for his friendship with Martin Luther King, Jr, his marching at Selma (“my legs were praying...!”), and his leading role in opposition to the war in Vietnam. In addition to his great life-work as theologian and Judaic scholar, he made important contributions to Jewish/Christian relations (especially in connection with Vatican II), religious education, and the shaping of the American rabbinate. His voice, alongside that of Elie Wiesel, was among the first to be raised for the plight of Soviet Jewry, years before this became a subject of international Jewish concern. Through us, his students, he has been (along with Martin Buber) one of the two most important intellectual/theological influences and models for the Jewish renewal movement, beginning with the havurot of the late 1960s. Heschel helped us to recover and articulate a sense of spirituality within Judaism. Translating that religion of spiritual insight and sensibility into one of imperative and action was Heschel’s greatest task, and remains ours.

But Heschel, both the man and the thinker, was formed in Europe. When he arrived in America in 1940, at the age of thirty-three, the three major shaping influences on his life were already in place: the Hasidic world of his childhood, the (mostly Jewish) intellectual community of Berlin and the disciplines studied at its university, and the experience of living for five years in, and finally being booted out of, Nazi Germany. Of course he was influenced and refined further by the land in which he lived in the second half of his life. But I believe that for Heschel, the American experience was seen largely through one or another of these three lenses that he brought with him from Europe.¹

Hasidic Warsaw was the first part of that European experience. Heschel was the scion of several of the great Hasidic families of Eastern Europe. For at least five or six generations, virtually all of his

male ancestors had been Hasidic *rebbe*s. Raised to continue in the family tradition, it was at first assumed that young Heschel, who was a Talmudic as well as a spiritual prodigy, would be a great figure within the Hasidic world. On his mother's side, he was most closely related to his uncle the Novominsker rebbe, whose court had moved to Warsaw where Heschel was raised, and on his father's side to the Kopyczienicer, who were centered in Vienna, but also to Czortkow and Husiatyn, branches of the Ruzhin family, the descendants of the Maggid of Miedzyrzec. These were all Ukrainian and Eastern Polish dynasties;² members of Heschel's family were culturally immigrants to Warsaw, where Hasidic Jewry was dominated by Kotsk and Ger, to which he had no family connection. As a Hasidic youth in Warsaw, he was, however, taught in the Gerer schools and had a personal tutor who was a devoted Kotsker hasid. Hence the very different worlds that Heschel late in his life referred to as *Medzhybozh*³ and Kotsk came to dwell together in his soul. Heschel left this world behind, however, as an adolescent, something of a rebel, seeking the kind of education that his extended family obviously would have preferred that he do without. The Hasidic world of Warsaw was too narrow for him; he saw the small-mindedness that necessarily resulted from the tremendous effort expended to shut out the modern world. He also experienced the competition and frequent bickering that went on among the various dynasties, all of them led by men who were there because of their lineage, but few of whom retained the charismatic qualities that had first made the progenitors of their lines into *rebbe*s.⁴

Hasidism thus existed for Heschel as something that belonged to his past, a world to which he no longer fully belonged. Yet it seems he still felt that Hasidism *belonged to him*. Heschel may in part be seen as part of a rather remarkable group of *rebbe*she *eyneklekh*,⁵ descendants of Hasidic *rebbe*s who, though no longer part of the community, took pride in their Hasidic legacy and continued to view Judaism through Hasidic eyes. This group includes such diverse figures as historian Shmuel Abba Horodezky, psychologist and novelist Fishel Schneersohn, novelist Yohanan Twersky, and memoirist Malka Bina Shapira. Heschel's understanding of Judaism was in many ways a Hasidic one. The books he chose to teach in seminars⁶ and the sources he quotes in his late theological writings⁷ include works that were specifically either Hasidic in origin or key to the Hasidic library. *The Sabbath* is a work possible only against the background of Hasidism. The grand entryway into *God in Search of Man*, the language of depth theology, the journey through awe, wonder, and mystery, all draw on the Hasidic consciousness. Heschel retained much affection for, and a certain loyalty to, Hasidism throughout his American years. At the same time as he was writing his widely read theological classics

(*Man Is Not Alone*, 1951; *Man's Quest for God*, 1954; *God in Search of Man*, 1955), he was also publishing, in Hebrew, meticulously researched historical articles on the early generations of Hasidism.⁸ Some of this renewed interest in his own closest roots, of course, was sharpened by the terrible sense of loss Heschel felt after the Holocaust.

In 1944, when the dimensions of European Jewry's loss had become clear, Heschel was invited by the leadership of YIVO, the Yiddish Scientific Institute in New York (itself a recent transplant from Vilna), to deliver a memorial lecture. This magnificent piece of Yiddish oratory, *The East European Jew* (published in Yiddish in 1946), was expanded and translated as *The Earth Is the Lord's*.⁹ Along with Roman Vishniac's photos in *Polish Jews*, this work served as the most significant *kaddish* for the Holocaust that was available to most American Jews for nearly twenty years. In it Heschel overcame any distance, either geographical or critical, that the Berlin years had placed between him and the world of his childhood. In the early postwar years, Heschel came to see himself as one of the last who really understood that lost universe; he was the lone survivor in the tale of Job, the one who says, "I alone have escaped to tell thee." His readoption of the name "Joshua" during or immediately after the War, a change that made his name instantly recognizable to Polish Jews as that of a Hasidic *rebbe*, was certainly part of this, a partial willingness to reassume the mantle of family heritage. Heschel had a mixed attitude toward reemergent Hasidism as it existed in New York in the postwar years. He remained personally close to his surviving relatives (some of whom had preceded him to America), leaders in that community, but maintained a silent truce with them on questions of religious values and priorities.

Looking in retrospect at Heschel's mature thought, we may say that the key themes of his complex writings are the loftiest mysteries of existence as perceived, celebrated, and challenged by the questioning religious mind. He seeks to create an inspired phenomenology of religious living around such themes as the mutual relationship of God and person, our human need for God, and the question of whether God has any need for us. Ever fascinated by the claim that each person is God's image, he reflects profoundly on the nature of humanity and the role of community and leadership. Seeking out the point of interconnection between human society and the divine, he reexamines and clarifies the place of prophecy, revelation, and commandment, as well as the human response to these in prayer and the power of deeds. Although all of these mighty questions are addressed from a specifically Jewish (and often Biblical) point of view, they are framed in a

universal human context, addressing the non-Jewish reader as well as the Jew.

It is Heschel's universalism, including the fact that he was loved and appreciated by so many non-Jewish readers, which makes him a uniquely American phenomenon. It was widely felt that Heschel was no mere apologist or defender of tradition, but a person of authentic spiritual experience, rooted deeply in his own Hasidic background. But what did Heschel learn from the Hasidic traditions he knew so well with regard to these central themes of his future thought? What does it mean to claim Heschel as a neo-Hasidic figure? Heschel positioned himself as an eloquent representative of the classical Jewish tradition as a whole. He studied and taught Maimonides and Abarbanel as well as the Ba'al Shem Tov. His original academic work was on the prophets, who presumably precede the distinction between *hasid* and *mitnagged*. He refused to be publicly critical of any aspect of the tradition. In dealing both with Christians and Jews, Heschel saw himself as a spokesman for Torah in the broadest sense, for the religion of the Hebrew Bible, for the Word and People of God. He never referred to himself as a "mystic," seemingly accepting the cultural bias against that word that reigned in 1940s and 1950s America. Although he wrote scholarly articles on the early history of Hasidism, he did not place himself in the role of the movement's defender and refused to be sidelined as a representative of "the mystical tradition." He disliked sectarianism and saw beyond denominational distinctions. Although close to the leadership of the Conservative movement, he was as critical of it as he was of Orthodoxy, Reform, and secularism. He was not called upon, nor would he have wanted to, champion Hasidism at the expense of any other Jewish movement. Yet still there is, I would claim, a distinctly Hasidic cast to Heschel's Judaism. How is it present in his thought, and in what ways, if any, was he at pains to transform or universalize it?

In answering these questions one must make use of all of Heschel's varied writings, published in four languages and over the course of his lifetime and later. But Heschel's first published work, a collection of poems called *Der Shem Hameforesh: Mentsh* (Warsaw: Indzl, 1933)¹⁰ is of special significance. The title itself, translated as *The Divine Name: Man*, sets the tone of religious humanism that so characterizes all of Heschel's writings. Many specific themes developed later make their appearance in the poems collected in this clearly highly personal and revealing volume.

It is in five areas that Heschel's roots within Hasidism may be seen as significant. First, his work is Hasidic in that it maintains a sense of wonder about God who fills the universe. The Biblical exclamation, "The whole earth is filled with His glory!" and the Zohar's, "There is

no place devoid of Him!” become twin watchwords of the Hasidic consciousness. This is the core religious experience of the Ba’al Shem Tov, around which all of Hasidism crystallized: there exists neither time nor place where God cannot be found by one who has the inner training and courage to open the eyes to see. From the *Upright Practices* of Rabbi Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl:

Believe with a whole and strong faith that “the whole earth is filled with His glory!” and that “there is no place devoid of Him.” His blessed glory inhabits all that is. This glory serves as a garment, as the sages taught: “Rabbi Yohanan called his garment ‘glory.’” His divine self wears all things as one wears a cloak, as Scripture says: “You give life to them all.”¹¹

To see this, and to show it to others, is the task of the *zaddik*. Listen to young Heschel’s bold self-description in the poem “Intimate Hymn”:

I have come to sow the seed of sight in the world,
To unmask the God who disguises Himself as world.

Like many of the lines in Heschel’s Poems, this one has to be read quite carefully. The Yiddish “*kh’bin gekumen zayen zeyen in der velt*” is a line of great power and daring. The “I have come” formula is attributed to the Ba’al Shem Tov in numerous sources, explaining the meaning of his mission. It is a kind of formulation familiar in the speeches of other great religious teachers as well. Young Heschel does not appropriate it lightly. The line reveals that he thinks of himself as having a mission of bringing religious awareness to others. The notion of “unmasking” the God “who disguises Himself as world” is a precisely Hasidic way of seeing the God–world relationship, expressed much more boldly here than in Heschel’s later writings.

But the statement of young Heschel’s mission is also connected to Psalm 97:11, “Light is sown for the righteous,” one of the Biblical verses most often quoted and interpreted in Hasidic writings. The divine light (*or ha-ganuz*) is hidden, sown into the ground, buried behind the mask of nature, waiting for the *zaddik* to reveal it. I am here, Heschel says, “to sow sight,” to help others discover that hidden light. A true *rebbe* is one who can discover that light and make it visible to others. It is a line the Ba’al Shem Tov could well have used about himself.

For the Biblical authors, prophets and Psalmists alike, it was clear that the wonders of Creation were a primary testament to the workings of God. To know God, one needed to appreciate and revere His handiwork. This view of nature as a testament to God diminished significantly in the Talmudic age and it may be said that both the Kabbalists and the Hasidim sought to restore it to its place of primacy. The Kabbalists (I refer to the sefirotic Kabbalah of the thirteenth century) did so by means of symbolism: nature is glorified through the

fact that images of the natural world (often taken from the landscape imagery of the Psalter or the Song of Songs) are included in the symbol clusters used to describe aspects of the divine self: *sefirot* are streams and rivers, nut trees and gardens; aspects of the Godhead are described as sun and moon, sky and earth, etc.

In Hasidism the restoration of nature is done quite directly, without need for the symbolic bridge. All the world is a cloak or mask, which hides behind it the great light of God. Hasidism sings the glories of all Creation, but especially the forest, so much a reality in the Eastern European landscape of the eighteenth century. This is the forest to which the Ba'al Shem Tov, as a child, would run away from *kheyder* (school) to be alone with God. This is the forest of Rabbi Nahman's tales, where one can truly lose and find oneself. This is also the forest of Heschel the student, who covers his head in reverence when going for a walk in the local woods, and who writes in a poem called "I Befriend Forests":

You are a soul incognito,
My beloved tree...
As I step lightly into the forest
How tree-like I become!
"Grandfather! Grandfather!" I call to the spruce
Your offspring has come to you.

In the Yiddish, "My beloved tree" is *Sertse mayns, O boim*. The choice of the Slavic word *sertse* for "beloved" is unusual; it contains an echo of Levi Yizhak, who was known to use that term in a parable about a lovable drunk who calls everyone *sertse*. Here that love is extended farther, into the natural world.

The sense of wonder, which Heschel so well understands to be basic to all religious consciousness, may be traced right back to Abraham, in a famous passage from the ancient Midrash of Genesis that Heschel quotes several times:

Abraham may be compared to a man travelling from place to place who came upon a *birah doleget* [usually translated as "a burning palace," but Heschel insisted that it could also be rendered: "a palace full of light"]. Could it be, he said, that there is no one to care for the palace? The owner looked out at him and said: I am the master of the palace. Similarly, since Abraham our Father wondered: Could it be that there is no one to care for the world? The blessed Holy one looked out at him and said: I am master of the world.¹²

Here is R. Mordecai Joseph of Izbica (d. 1853/54), originally a disciple of the Kotsker rebbe, on that same passage:

[The prayerbook] says: "He does wonders...renewing each day the work of Creation." But what renewal is there if Creation is renewed

each day? Doesn't the renewal itself become habitual? What then is left of it?

The fact is, however, that God makes the habitual into something new, bringing wonder into the hearts of those who hope in Him, so that of each thing they say: "Who created these?"

Thus it was with Abraham our Father, of blessed memory. The world had gone on for some time before he came along, with no one asking or wondering about its conduct. *In Abraham's heart there was very great wonder.* "Might you say the palace has no owner? Who is the palace's owner? When God saw that his questions were not those of the natural scientist, but that he *truly* wanted to know "Who created these?" *in order to serve Him*, and had rejected all worldly pleasures for this sake, the blessed Lord had to reveal Himself and show him that He was indeed Master of the palace.¹³

Both in evoking wonder as a key to the growth of religious consciousness and in distinguishing scientific approaches to nature from that of the devotee, Heschel is faithful to these roots in Polish Hasidism. Though Izbica Hasidism broke off from that of Kotsk, this passage is a faithful reflection of the Kotsk/Ger tradition in which Heschel was first schooled.

Heschel the mature thinker, viewing the American cultural landscape, was profoundly disturbed by the secularization of consciousness among modern Jews (and moderns in general). Heschel wanted to re-create for moderns a Jewish life centered on God. For Heschel, the real and ultimate religious question was the only one that mattered. How do we become aware of God's presence in our lives, of God's passionate and compassionate concern for us? How do we awaken ourselves to respond to the divine call? What will we *do* about it? The cultivation of *da'at*, of a true religious mindfulness that goes deeper than intellectual understanding, is the central subject of many an early Hasidic work and may be seen to be the goal of Heschel's writings as well. He wanted Jews to experience God more fully and to be less shy in talking both *to* God and *about* God. To lead them to this, he had to write about theology in an evocative and passionate way, demonstrating his faith as he expounded on it. For all of this, one may say at least metaphorically that Heschel had the writings of the Hasidic masters open before him. The "God intoxication" that makes Heschel so distinctive among twentieth-century religious thinkers came directly from Hasidism, both its teachings and its nostalgically recreated example.

A second aspect of Heschel's Hasidism is his understanding that God, God's existence, and divine providence, are not to be proven. Although he sees himself as a philosopher (a point long debated among his students and critics), logical argumentation was hardly his forte. Heschel in fact saw himself as engaged in redeeming the word "philosophy" itself from the hands of those who had rendered it

dispassionate and “objective,” those so caught up in the analysis of argument and critical “distance” that they were forced into indifference to the horrors of our age. The person of faith does not argue, but *witnesses*. The God of Hasidism, despite all the pantheistic formulations, is also the God of Abraham, not that of Aristotle. For this God, postulates mean nothing. The God of Abraham is the God of living faith, not a God whose existence has to be assumed for philosophic reason.

Here Heschel stands counter to the neo-Kantians of his age. He does not seek a God whose existence will be presumed or postulated in order to provide a basis for moral absolutes. Heschel believes that the real existence of God does in fact demand moral absolutes, to be sure. But the reality of faith comes first, and it is one to which the person of faith can and must always testify, but which he or she cannot prove. Heschel’s work and life collectively constitute that testimony, of which he said in an early poem:

How miniscule my offering,
My gift, my way of honoring
Your presence. What can I do
But go about the world and swear
Not just believe—but testify and swear.

The Jew as witness who testifies to God’s greatness is key to the Hasidic legacy of Ger. The festivals are frequently described by the *Sefat Emet*, the key writing of that tradition, as times of special witnessing, connecting the term *mo’ed* (festival) with ‘*ed*, meaning “witness.”¹⁴ Its author’s son, Rabbi Abraham Mordecai of Ger (who was *rebbe* while Heschel studied in the movement’s schools), noted that the concluding two paragraphs of the daily liturgy, the ‘*alenu*, each of which begins with the letter ‘*ayin* and ends with the letter ‘*dalet*, form the work ‘*ed*, serving as the two required witnesses testifying to the sincerity of our prayers. Both Sinai itself and the daily recitation of the *shema’* are taken in the Ger tradition as moments of universal witness.

God has chosen the Children of Israel as His own portion. One might think that this would make for a greater distance between God and the other nations. But actually just the opposite is true. This was God’s deeper plan: to bring all nations near to Him by means of Israel... for they are God’s emissaries, to bring all creatures near to Him.

This is the meaning of: “The Lord spoke all these words, saying: ‘I am the Lord your God’ (Ex.20:1-2).”... The intent is that Israel speak these words, drawing them into rung after rung, until all creatures are brought close to God. The life-force of all is in the Torah, and all are to be redeemed by the power of Torah. This is the meaning of “saying” in that verse: every one of Israel has to bear witness to the Creator each day. Twice a day we say “Hear, O Israel.”

These words shine forth to all the world, to all who are created. . . . This becomes the oral Torah, of which we say: "Eternal life has He emplanted within us." The words of Torah were absorbed into their soul . . . their very selves became Torah.¹⁵

Here is Hasidism, a highly particularist and exclusivist reading of Judaism, veering as close as it ever does to the universalist edge. The Oral Torah is the Torah that we speak, proclaiming God's truth before the world each day. Heschel, an avid reader of the *Sefat Emet*, would have rejoiced at finding such a passage. That is the level of testimony of which each Jew is capable, daily bearing witness to the world not just believing, but testifying and swearing. Or, in the words of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav: "I *am* a 'know what to answer the heretic!'"¹⁶ R. Nahman means to say that his life itself, not only his teachings, serves to refute the heretics' claims. Heschel would agree that life itself is testimony. So would Kierkegaard, whom Heschel regarded highly enough to compare to the Kotzker.

The third point is that Heschel knows the world is in need of great charismatic religious figures. Such people can have tremendous power and effect upon those around them. Heschel grew up nourished by tales of such people, "with my mother's milk," as he used to say. In the classic Hasidic tradition, of course, the transformative power of the holy man's words affected not only people, but also God. "The blessed Holy One issues a decree but the *zaddik* can cancel it"¹⁷ is a widely quoted Talmudic dictum that underlies the popular Hasidic belief in the efficacy of wonder-working rabbis' prayers. It seems rather clear that Heschel was not one to take this belief too literally. Without some rebellion, at least on this level, he never could have left Warsaw. Well-trained to the Kotsker's critical view of Hasidism, he saw such claims as being of very varied merit. Later, of course, he was also enough of an insider to the years of post-Holocaust trauma, when such claims seemed so utterly hollow, that he could not trumpet them. But this does not mean that he abandoned the Hasidic faith in charismatic leadership and its role in human religious community. Much of his intellectual life, after all, was devoted to the prophets, their experience of God, and their message. It is hard to imagine that images of the Hasidic masters, especially of the Kotsker, did not cross his mind as he read and considered the prophets.

I would like to suggest that the prophets served a similar role for Heschel to that served by the Hasidic masters for Martin Buber. Each of these men had to look elsewhere—Buber to Hasidic Eastern Europe, Heschel to the distant past of ancient Israel—for examples of the holy and charismatic figures that both men strove to become and knew were so much needed in our day. The Hasidic masters were too close for Heschel to use them as his primary example; he knew too much of

their failings to put them on the sort of pedestal that the more distant Buber could. Heschel could have been a Hasidic *rebbe*, after all, but had chosen not to become one. But the figure of the prophet, the topic of Heschel's doctoral dissertation in Berlin in 1936 and a major book (*The Prophets*) in 1962, emphasizing the experience of pathos and identification with God as the core of the prophetic phenomenon, surely bears echoes of such religious figures as Heschel knew them in the Hasidic setting. The Hasidic yearning for *true* charisma is alive and well in Heschel.

As for the claim that the true Hasidic master could negate the divine decree, Heschel was able to reread it in the spirit of R. Levi Yizhak, who insisted that the decree that the *zaddik* can nullify (or better here: "transform") is nothing other than Torah itself! Not the nullification of destructive heavenly decrees is the object of the *zaddik's* powers, but rather the transformative renewal of God's eternal message:

A basic principle in God's service: we...believe in two Torahs: written and oral, both given by a single Shepherd....The written Torah was given us by Moses, God's faithful servant, in writing etched on the tablets, black fire on white fire. The oral Torah given to Moses is its interpretation, including "everything a faithful student is ever to discover." This means that the oral Torah given to us essentially follows the interpretation of the *zaddikim* of the generation. *As they interpret the Torah, so it is.* This great power has been given us by the Creator out of love for Israel, His chosen people. All the worlds follow their will in Torah. Thus did the sages say: "The Holy One issues a decree, but the *zaddik* may nullify it."¹⁸

It does not seem far-fetched to say that this is what Heschel sought to do for his own era: to be the charismatic voice that had survived and come to the new world, rearticulating the truth of Torah in a new language for a new generation. By the time of *Man Is Not Alone*, Heschel has accepted the obligation not to flee from this attractive, yet terribly frightening and overpowering, role. The legacy he had left behind in Warsaw had indeed caught up with him. Thoughtful readers of Heschel's essay: "Did Maimonides Believe that He Had Attained Prophecy?"¹⁹ have been tempted to pose the question rather to the essay's author. Did Heschel consider himself a prophetic figure? There were certainly ways in which he cultivated that image, especially during the 1960's, the heyday of his activism on the historical stage. The insight of Elie Schweid²⁰ that the *study* of prophecy becomes a central preoccupation in modern Jewish thinkers—Ahad Ha'Am, Buber, Kaufmann—who would wish to reclaim the prophetic mantle but dare not do so, certainly applies to Heschel, perhaps even more than others.

A fourth area of obvious Hasidic influence is Heschel's great belief in the Hasidic virtues of *hesed* and *simhah* as key to the spiritual life. When we heard Heschel read the famous passages in the *Toldot Ya'akov Yosef* or the *Kedushat Levi* about the proper *mokhiaḥ* (preacher or chastiser), who brings people back to God *be-derekh ha-hesed* ("by means of kindness") rather than by harsh threats, we understood that Heschel saw his own role in this way. He never berated Jews for not being observant, but tried to show them the light and beauty that he found in the religious life. He saw his job as helping people to open their eyes in a deeper way, and he knew that this could only be done by positive example, not by anger or judgment. In this sense I think it fair to say that he did indeed take on the role of *rebbe*, however reluctantly, for liberal Jews. There is something very much Hasidic, in the original sense of Hasidism (before it became a weapon against modernity and sometimes revealed an angry face) present in this approach. Hasidism understands anger, even righteous anger, as a negative characteristic, emerging from too strong a pull to the left side or the presence of too much black bile in the system. It has to be countered by the activation of *hesed*, divine love or compassion, for which Hasidism is named, after all. To be a *hasid* is to be an *ish ha-hesed*, something Heschel tried to exemplify all his life. This is found in his writings on education and of course formed the basis for his commitment to reasserting the voice of religion in powerful non-violent movements for social change. In Martin Luther King he saw *gevurah shebe-hesed*, if I may say it in Hasidic language—the tremendous power that lay hidden in acts of love.

On the side of negative evidence, it is noteworthy how remarkably little interest we find in *sin* in Heschel's writings.²¹ While Heschel speaks very often of *mitzvot* and religious action and obligation are key to his system, as we shall see below, he very seldom mentions sin. When he does, it is clear that he is not speaking of an ontological category. "To the prophets, sin is not an ultimate, irreducible, or independent condition, but rather a disturbance in the relationship between God and man; it is as adverb, not a noun . . ." ²² Despite a certain attraction to the thought of Christian neo-Orthodoxy (for the seriousness with which it treated both God and Scripture), Heschel never accepted the key notion of Karl Barth and his followers that man is filled with or "conceived in," sin and therefore in need of salvation. Here he saw a great gulf between Judaism and Christianity. In fact, because there is little sense of sin, there is little need for eschatology in Heschel's system. The redemption of which we are in need comes about through our response to God's call and our actions. "Creation/Revelation/Religious Action" may be seen as the triad around which *God in Search of Man* is written. If there is a salvific

teaching here, it is more we who are “saviors of God”²³ than the other way around. The great sense of sacred partnership is key to Heschel’s reading of Judaism, and it is the potential glory of the human being and the high source of the human soul that he seeks to help us discover. Concentration on sin would have been a distraction from this. But that choice comes from his Hasidic background, where *mitzvah* (sometimes playfully derived from the word *tsavta* in Aramaic, meaning “that which brings God and the person together”) is central, but excessive worry about one’s sins (*de’agat ‘avonot*) is to be avoided. Serving God in joy and wholeness is the goal, and over concern with sin keeps one from it. In this sense, Heschel is very much a *hasid* and not a *mussarnik*, for example, in his understanding of the human being. Compare the place of sin in Heschel and Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, for example, and you will see the difference between a *hasid* and a *mitnagged*’s readings of Judaism.

Now I come to the fifth and final point, which really forms the heart of my reading of Heschel’s *oeuvre* altogether. The most powerful and distinctive motif in Heschel’s theology is that encapsulated by the phrase *God in Search of Man*. Heschel knew a God who is concerned with and affected by human actions. God creates each human in the divine image so that we may fulfill the role of partnership with God, so that we may discover God’s presence within the world and within our own souls and respond to it, with heart but primarily by deed. God awaits this response.

I want to understand the literary source of this conviction through an assignment that Heschel gave me in the years I was privileged to study with him. Since I was interested in Kabbalah, he had me read through the entirety of a book called *‘Avodat ha-Qodesh* (“The Divine Service”), a kind of *Summa Kabbalistica* by Rabbi Meir Ibn Gabbai, as author born in Spain in 1481, who survived the expulsion and lived his adult life somewhere in the Ottoman Empire. The key theme in that book, repeated and defended in chapter after chapter, is *ha-‘avodah tzorekh gavoha*, “worship fulfills a divine need.” The notion is not new in Ibn Gabbai, who is seldom an original thinker. It can be clearly traced back to Nahmanides, the great thirteenth-century rabbi who lent credibility to Kabbalah by including its secrets within his widely read Torah commentary.²⁴ Both Nahmanides and Gabbai use this notion in fierce anti-Maimonidean polemics, opposing the philosophical coolness of the philosopher’s God who remains unaffected by human actions on the lowly material plane.

Heschel was fascinated by this debate between philosopher and Kabbalist and he sought to trace it back a step farther, rooting it in the struggle between the two great schools of early rabbinic thought that he outlined in his *Torah min ha-Shamayim*, now so ably translated by

Gordon Tucker.²⁵ RaMBaM versus RaMBaN becomes Rabbi Ishmael versus Rabbi Akiva, with the latter as proto-mystic, religious romantic, lover of the supernatural, and one who insisted that God is indeed strengthened or (God forbid!) weakened by the loyalty and deeds of Israel. While Heschel clearly identified with aspects of both Akiva and Ishmael as he portrayed them, on this matter of the *mitzvot* as religious actions and their ability to affect God, he was clearly an Akivan.

Whence did this notion of God's need for the *mitzvot*, rarified into *God in Search of Man*, come to Heschel? Heschel learned about the secret and mysterious power of the *mitzvot* in the Hasidic world. The special love and devotion that Hasidic *rebbe*s lavished upon the *mitzvot* is legendary; Heschel was surrounded by this in his childhood. Although Hasidism by its second generation had abandoned the complex infrastructure of Lurianic *kavvanot* or mystical intentions for prayer and most of daily life, certain particular *mitzvot* were still treated as mysterious sacraments, with only partially understood *kavvanot* retained for them, but with the promise that the *zaddik's* performance of them could take the heavens by storm and affect the divine will, even to the point of changing ill decrees in heaven, a concern very central to the original intent of the Ba'al Shem Tov.²⁶

Heschel was not, as we have said, a naïve or literal believer in the power of the *zaddik* to repeal the decree of heaven. But he was also unwilling to abandon this dramatic sense of the cosmic importance of human deeds, which added so much to the value of humanity and the sense of divine/human partnership. He thus chose to undertake a very interesting shift in the way he read this part of the Hasidic/Kabbalistic legacy. When Hasidic *rebbe*s spoke of *sodot ha-mitzvot*, the commandments as sublime secrets, *razin 'ila'in*, they usually were referring to such mystery-laden religious acts as *teqi'at shofar*, the blowing of the ram's horn on the New year, *na'annu'ey lulav*, the waving of the palm and other branches on Sukkot, or *tevillah ba-mikveh*, immersion in the ritual bath. *Rebbe*s would prepare intensely for these sacred moments, often turning back to the old *kavvanot*. Surely these all needed to be done *le-shem shamayim*, "for the sake of heaven." On the simplest level that was defined in classical Kabbalistic language as *le-shem yihud qudsha brikh hu u-shekhinteyh*, "in order to unify the blessed Holy One and His *shekhinah*."²⁷ Heschel was surely impressed by the power of such religious performance and the serious devotion it entailed. But now he made a brilliant and transformative move: Heschel agreed with his Hasidic tradition that God longs for us to do the *mitzvot* and that heaven itself is moved by our deeds. But he applied this first and foremost to the *mitzvot beyn adam le-havero*, to the commandments that regard the way we treat our fellow humans. God *needs* you to do the

mitzvot indeed—to feed the hungry, to care for the poor, to sustain widows and orphans. These were the essence of *mitzvot* for Heschel. It is primarily through these that you become God’s partner in the world. As a traditionalist, of course, Heschel never denied the importance of ritual observance. His works were often used as a buttress to defend it. But if you look at the key thrust of the latter part of *God in Search of Man*, combined with *The Prophets* and several of his essays, it is clear that what God seeks of us in the first place are those *mitzvot* that demonstrate human decency, compassion for the oppressed and needy, and a response to the prophetic call for justice restored to God’s world.²⁸

Heschel takes the Kabbalistic/Hasidic view of Judaism and its commandments most seriously. He understands that it gives an infinite depth of meaning to the religious act that no claim of the spontaneous celebration of God’s presence (Buber) and no debate about autonomy or heteronomy (Hermann Cohen) could ever provide. Here one is doing something for God, offering a gift of mysterious and unfathomable significance. But Heschel’s creativity lies in the great subtlety with which he treats this theme of “the deed,” which serves as the climax of his philosophy. Heschel is no Kabbalist; he does not want to say in any coarse or simplistic way that the *mitzvot* fulfill a divine need. But he does want to say that human actions done in holiness, deeds that seek to fulfill God’s will in this world, are an infinite source of blessing to God and to the world. Here are his words on the subject, from the concluding pages of *Man Is Not Alone*:

Piety, finally, is allegiance to the will of God. Whether that will is understood or not, it is accepted as good and holy, and is obeyed in faith. . . . All the pious man’s thoughts and plans revolve around this concern, and nothing can distract him or turn him from the way. . . . His preoccupation with the will of God is not limited to a section of his activities, but his great desire is to place his whole life at the disposal of God. In this he finds the real meaning of life. . . . In this way, he feels that whatever he does, he is ascending step by step a ladder leading to the ultimate. In aiding a creature, he is helping the Creator. In succoring the poor, he fulfills a concern of God. In admiring the good, he reveres the spirit of God. In loving the pure, he is drawn to Him. In promoting the right, he is directing things toward His will, in which all aims must terminate. . . . The glory of a man’s devotion to the good becomes a treasure of God on earth.²⁹

Torah and commandments, as Judaism classically knows them, are part of this, to be sure. But the boundaries of good deeds are expanded beyond all limitation. Heschel has subtly turned around the order of priorities. Yes, the *mitzvot* are indeed divine need, he says, but it is in the first case these commandments—the life of goodness and justice—that God needs of us. In doing this, of course, Heschel is

restoring the link between the Hasidic masters he knew and the prophets of ancient Israel. The God who needs us to live holy lives, to be His witness in the world, by loving goodness and doing justice, is a God who is rooted in Isaiah and Jeremiah as well as in the Ba'al Shem Tov and Levi Yizhak. The message is a Biblical one, one that the world can again learn from us, one that needs to be shared and made real by marching in Selma, by speaking out against unjust war.

Heschel sought to rescue the notion of *mitzvot tzorekh gavoha* from the obscurantism of the mystics and to bring it back to what he believed was its first source—the teachings of the prophets of Israel. The “missing link” in Heschel’s *oeuvre*—perhaps left unwritten due to his sudden death—is the step that traces *tzorekh gavoha*—already extending from Hasidism to RamBaN to Rabbi Akiva—back to Isaiah, Amos, and Micah. In other words, I am claiming Heschel’s version of prophetic Judaism, including the pathos with which the prophet identifies with the will of God, as an expression of his neo-Hasidism. He comes from that place in the Hasidic tradition that loves the commandments, seeing them as God’s great gift to us as a means to be close to Him, even as a meeting place between the divine and human spirit. Not mere requirements of the law-code or ways to fence about out evil urge, the *mitzvot* are the means by which we reach toward transcendence. Ever the man of expansive vision, Heschel understands this to mean that God in His love for all of us humans calls upon us to do transforming deeds, to act in way that will at once make our lives holy and the world more whole. The hope of humanity is that we can, and will, still respond to that voice, one that has never ceased calling out to us.

HEBREW COLLEGE

NOTES

1. A great deal of detailed information on Heschel’s European period can be found in Edward K. Kaplan and Samuel H. Dresner, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Prophetic Witness* (New Haven, London: Yale, 1998). See genealogies on pp. x–xi.

2. Novominsk is a later offshoot of the Koidenov/Lechowicz dynasties, a Lithuanian-Bellorussian form of Hasidism. The history of the dynasty is treated in Wolf Rabinowitsch’s *Lithuanian Hasidism* (New York: Schocken, 1971) and in a small (uncritical) volume *Mi-Gedoley ha-Torah voha-Hasidut*, Vol. 20, by A. Y. Bromberg (Jerusalem: Ha-Makhon le-Hasidut, 1962/63). The rebbes of Kopyczienic were a

branch of the direct descendents of R. Abraham Joshua Heschel of Opatow (Apt; 1754/55–1825), Heschel's namesake and founder of the line.

3. Heschel's ancestor the Rabbi of Apt in fact settled in Miedzybozh, the home of the Ba'al Shem Tov, in his later years. This in fact gave Heschel a direct familial association with what may be called the birth-place of Hasidism.

4. It was the Kotzker influence on Heschel that caused him to question the validity of inherited Hasidic authority, possibly as early as his own adolescence, when he turned aside from the opportunity to succeed his father as *rebbe*. See discussion of the *rebbe's* role, including frank discussions of pretense ("imitation") and its dangers in Heschel's *Kotzk: In Gerangel far Emesdikeyt* (Tel Aviv, 1973), pp. 423ff. and pp. 438ff., etc.

5. I am grateful to a conversation with Nicham Ross for this insight. Schneersohn was a direct influence on Heschel, as documented by Kaplan and Dresner (see their index). So too was Hillel Zeitlin (1871–1942), the first important neo-Hasidic writer. Zeitlin was shunned by most of Hasidic Warsaw, including Ger, but was close to the Novominsker, at whose table young Heschel surely met him. See my discussion in "Three Warsaw Mystics," *Kolot Rabbim: The Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer Memorial Volume* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1998), English Section, pp. 1–58.

6. These included the writings of Kabbalist Meir Ibn Gabbai (b. 1491), the *Shney Luhot ha-Brit* of Isaiah Horowitz (1565–1630), the section 'amud ha-tefillah in *Sefer Ba'al Shem Tov*, *Qedushat Levi* by Levi Yizhak of Berdichev, etc.

7. On Heschel's use of sources, see the important dissertation by Michael Marmor, *Heschel's Rhetoric of Citation: The Use of Sources in God in Search of Man* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 2005).

8. These studies have been collected and translated under the title *The Circle of the Ba'al Shem Tov*, ed. Samuel Dresner (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1985).

9. (New York: Henry Schuman, 1950).

10. *The Ineffable Name of God – Man*, trans., Morton M. Leifman (New York: Continuum, 2004). See also the earlier unauthorized and "freely rendered" version by Zalman M. Schachter (privately printed, 1973). The translations below are my own.

11. The full text is translated in my *Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl: Upright Practices and The Light of the Eyes* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist, 1982).

12. *Bereshit Rabbah* 39:1.

13. *Mey ha-Shiloah, tazri'a* 1. (ed. Jerusalem, 1995, Vol. I, p. 109).

14. For further information on Ger, see Arthur Green, *The Language of Truth: Teachings from the Sefat Emet* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998).

15. *Sefat Emet, Yitro, 1880*. Translation and comment in *The Language of Truth*, pp. 106ff.

16. *Hayyey MoHaRaN II 7:13*. Discussed in Arthur Green, *Tormented Master: a Life of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav* (Alabama: University of Alabama, 1979), p. 317.

17. *B. Mo'ed Qatan 16b.*

18. *Qedushat Levi, Yitro.* Emphasis mine. Translated and discussed in my essay "Teachings of the Hasidic Masters" in Barry W. Holtz, *Back to the Sources* (New York: Schocken, 1984), pp. 376ff.

19. *Louis Ginzberg Jubilee Volume, 1945.* English translation in A. J. Heschel, *Prophetic Inspiration after the Prophets*, ed. Morris Faierstein (Hoboken: Ktav, 1996).

20. Eliezer Schweid, "Prophetic Mysticism in Twentieth-Century Jewish Thought," *Modern Judaism*, 14, no. 2 (1994): 139-174.

21. Some of this analysis emerged in a conversation with Shai Held, whose forthcoming doctoral dissertation of Heschel will treat it more fully.

22. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 229.

23. The title of a remarkable religious work by Nikos Kazantzakis. Heschel referred in teaching as well as in *Torah min ha-Shamayim* to the remarkable references to God being exiled and redeemed in the early Sukkot poem *Ke-Hosh'ata Elim*.

24. See RaMBaN to Exodus 29:46. The Chavel edition (Jerusalem, 1959-60) *ad loc.* quotes an array of Kabbalistic supercommentators on Nahmanides, including Ibn Gabbai, but without much understanding. In general, the Kabbalistic passages in Nahmanides are frequently misinterpreted in this edition, with the force of their symbolic language totally ignored. The same distortions carry over in the available English translation as well, which can simply not be trusted on any issues of Kabbalistic content. On Nahmanides as a Kabbalist see H. Pedaya, *Ha-RaMBaN: Hit'anut; Zeman Mahazor ve-Text Qadosh* (Tel Aviv: 'Am 'Oved, 2003).

25. *Abraham Joshua Heschel, Heavenly Torah as Refracted through the Generations*, ed. and trans. Gordon Tucker and Leonard Levin (New York, 2005).

26. This has been best demonstrated by Immanuel Etkes in his important study, *The Besht: Magician, Mystic, and Healer* (Hanover: New England, 2005).

27. In classic Kabbalistic terms, this refers to the restoring of unity between divine male and female, effected the *hieros gamos* that unites the upper worlds. But Hasidism emphasizes the indwelling quality of *shekhinah* to such an extent that it is surely fair to say, at least for some Hasidic authors, that the *le-shem yihud* formula meant restoration of an unbounded union between this earthly world and the divine. There is also a very significant debate within the Hasidic sources as to whether one is to seek any earthly blessing as a result of such devotion. The more extreme pietistic strain opposes any seeking of material reward for *'avodat ha-shem*. Surely the highest form of worship is for God's sake; do it "like the servant who seeks not to receive reward," as an early Hasidic source intentionally misreads the well-known passage in *Pirkey Avot* [*Degel Mahaneh Ephraim, Haftarat Ki Tetze* (ed. Jerusalem, 1963, p. 253)].

Quoted in A. Green and B. W. Holtz, *Your Word Is Fire* (Ramsey: Paulist, NJ, 1977). True worship requires utter selflessness, as though you did not exist in this world at all. But all those lofty pronouncements coexist with the *zaddik* as we know him in social context, a side of Hasidism that also has its intellectual defense. The *zaddik* cares so much for the world, loves his people so dearly, that he wants to bring them blessings. This is, after all, why Hasidism forced the ancient Jewish *zaddik*-figure out of hiding. The *lamed vav*/thirty-six hidden righteous could have sustained the cosmos by their prayers without being known to anyone; perhaps they could have done so better if left undisturbed. By proclaiming the virtues of the public holy man over the hidden one, Hasidism precisely wanted him to serve as a link between the upper and lower realms, to be the conduit of divine bounty in human beings living in the world. This point is made most forcefully by R. Levi Yizhak in a homily in which he contrasts the piety of Melchizedek, who serves God for the pure sake of “Nothing,” with Abraham, who serves in order to bring blessing into this world (*Qedushat Levi lekh lekha*). I believe the true subject of this homily is an inner Hasidic debate on this subject, and it is likely that Melchizedek is serving as a stand-in either for Dov Baer of Miezedyrzec, Levi Yizhak’s rebbe, or else for his friend and in-law, R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi, who was famous for refusing to pray for this worldly matters.

28. Heschel would never give expression to the rather obvious reverse side of this claim, the notion that God needs you to do these *mitzvot* because He has no other way of accomplishing them. That would have been too thoroughgoing a religious humanism for Heschel and would have deeply offended his traditionalist ethos. God’s calling upon us to do, to give, to open our hands to the needy is itself a call of love, not one of desperation.

29. *Man Is Not Alone* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1951), p. 294.