

An Introduction to Abraham Joshua Heschel's Theology

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The first part of this article is a biographical sketch¹ outlining the sources influencing Heschel's theology and pedagogical ambitions. Its emphasis is on dispelling the stigma he faces in the Orthodox community. The second part is an overview of his theology.

Part 1: Biographical Sketch

Introduction

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972) was among the most significant Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century. As an author, his writings concern the whole history of Jewish thought. In America, he was a symbol of both religious authenticity and social reform, leaving behind a legacy that impacted the lives of countless people across a wide range of religious affiliations. Among the black community, he was seen as a leader of civil rights, famously walking alongside Martin Luther King, Jr. during the Selma march. Christians of his time and today's hail him as one of the most important theologians of the century, whose depth of understanding aided in creating a newfound Christian appreciation of the Old Testament.

Yet among his own community, Heschel's name is one of controversy. While the Conservative movement continues to laud Heschel as having been their foremost leader, the Orthodox community persistently shuns him, often simply on the basis of his association with Conservatism.² Orthodox community leaders, many of them respected scholars, frequently move beyond ignoring Heschel's thinking and become hostile, exiling his books from the study halls without actually being aware of the values he embodied.

¹ For a more extensive history I suggest starting with "Heschel, Hasidism, and Halakha" by his closest student, Samuel H. Dresner, and the two-volume biography written by Edward K. Kaplan and Dresner.

² In the Israeli community Heschel's name is unrecognized by most. There are several causes, including lack of translated publications of his books and conflicts Heschel had with some of the prominent Israeli academics of his time.

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I suggest the possibility that the wisdom of an important Jewish thinker is being squandered. Heschel dedicated his life to censuring the behavioristic tendencies of religion that come from an overemphasis on *halakhab* among the right and its secularization stemming from the left's exaggerated efforts to modernize it. He determined that to best succeed in this undertaking, he should teach at a Conservative institution, where undoubtedly, he saw the problems as more urgent, and felt they gave him more freedom to focus on these goals. Unfortunately, the Orthodox community continues to suffer from many of the issues Heschel discussed. As a result of inadequate education rooted in the refusal to address the topics which Heschel found most pressing, countless people have searched for meaning outside what they perceive as Judaism's narrow constraints. My intention is to elucidate the accusations against Heschel and to illustrate why the stigma should not only be abandoned but reversed. I suggest that Heschel's works be actively endorsed in our communities.

In the course of this essay it will become clear that the Orthodox community's rejection of Heschel was born out of misunderstanding. Positions falsely attributed to him will be exposed as stemming from a lack of critical study. It will become obvious that he stood for many of the same values which the Orthodox community affirms. The content of Heschel's works, when explained, will show that he wasn't a reformer except to the extent that he sought to return Jewish thinking to its Biblical roots. Further reading will reveal that his most prominent influence came from Hasidism:³

...in order to grasp that Judaism consists not only of rules and regulations, but also offers a cosmos of inner meaning, one must study the great insights into that spiritual cosmos as set forth in our literature throughout the ages which reached its highest flowering in Hasidism.⁴

I begin with a concise biography of Heschel's life. I aim to provide the necessary context to foster an educated discussion. Possible reasons for his ostracism will be evaluated in greater detail to explain why they are either mistaken or irrelevant.

³ Heschel did spend a substantial time on medieval thinkers and was influenced by them as well. See his writings on Maimonides, Ibn Gabirol, Abravanel, and Saadia Gaon for examples.

⁴ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967), p. 217.

From Warsaw to Berlin

Born in Warsaw to an elite Hasidic dynasty, Heschel descended from some of its greatest leaders, whose influence molded Hasidism: the Rebbe of Apt, a close student of the Baal Shem Tov; the Maggid of Mezeritch the Rebbe of Ruzhin; Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, and Rabbi Shlomo of Karlin, to name a few. The youngest of six, he was quickly acknowledged not only as the brightest among his siblings but as a prodigy (*illui*). He was groomed from childhood to take over for his father as the next *Rebbe* of his small community. Immersed in the classic Jewish texts, he also studied the lesser known Hassidic and Kabbalistic writings. When Heschel was nine years old, his father passed away leaving his uncle, the Novominsker Rebbe, to become the child's teacher and mentor. He was then introduced to the harsh teachings of Kotzk in addition to the joyful Hassidism of the Baal Shem Tov. He would later write, in his last and most intimate book:

It was in my ninth year that the presence of Reb Menahem Mendl of Kotzk, known as the Kotzker, entered my life. Since then he has remained a steady companion and a haunting challenge. Although he often stunted me, he also urged me to confront perplexities that I might have preferred to evade.

Years later I realized that, in being guided by both the Baal Shem Tov and the Kotzker, I had allowed two forces to carry on a struggle within me... The Kotzker's presence recalls the nightmare of mendacity. The presence of the Baal Shem is an assurance that falsehood dissolves into compassion through the power of love. The Baal Shem suspends sadness, the Kotzker enhances it. The Baal Shem helped me to refine my sense of the immediate mystery; the Kotzker warned me of the constant peril of forfeiting authenticity.⁵

Heschel continued his learning under the esteemed Talmud scholar Rabbi Menahem Zemba, as well as at the Mesivta Yeshiva. At the young age of sixteen, after mastering the traditional halachic texts, he was ordained by Rabbi Zemba.⁶ His novel explanations on the Talmud were

⁵ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *A Passion for Truth* (Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1995), pp. xiv–xv.

⁶ His knowledge of the Talmud later enabled him to write a monumental three-volume tome entitled *Torah Min Ha-shamaim be-Aspaklarya Shel ha-Dorot*, a comprehensive overview of the different theological trends in the writing of the sages, using Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishmael as the conflicting identities leading

already being published in one of Warsaw's most respected halachic journals, and his uncle arranged for him to get married to solidify his status as the next Rebbe. At the time, many of the great Hassidic rabbis in his family believed he would be the leader to revitalize Hasidism.⁷

But in his teens, Heschel, like so many other youths from the Eastern European *shtetels* at the time, became curious about the world outside his community, and his mother, with great foresight, realized her son's need to experience more than the narrow world view he grew up with. She stopped the marriage from proceeding and there was a family meeting at the house of the T'chortkover Rebbe, where they granted Heschel permission to leave the community.

His departure from ultra-Orthodoxy foreshadowed an important critique he was to voice against the religious communities. He would later observe that faith in God was not forfeited due to logical refutations, but rather when

it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion, its message becomes meaningless.⁸

the differing views. Rabbi Hayyim Zimmerman, the eminent Talmudist, observed, after reading the book, that it must have taken at least ten years of unremitting labor to write it. Heschel actually wrote it in two years with no assistance while working on a number of other major projects. He later explained to Rabbi Samuel Dresner that "once he began, it just poured out as if it had been stored away in preparation for that moment." Samuel H. Dresner, *Heschel, Hasidism, and Halakha* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), pp. 100–101. Heschel expressed numerous times that he felt this was his most important work.

⁷ Edward K. Kaplan and Samuel H. Dresner, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Prophetic Witness* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 320 note 34, "Later, Heschel was sitting at the Tish of his brother-in-law, the Kopitzhinitzer rebbe, Abraham Joshua Heschel, on Henry Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. His cousin said to him: 'We hoped that you would be the Levi Yitzchak of our generation and save Hasidism. And I thought I would be your Hasid. Alas, you have come to sit at my table.'"

⁸ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: The Noonday Press Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), p. 3. Heschel never explicitly said this was directed towards the Orthodox denominations but it is hard to understand it as relating to those more liberal, who were to a large extent abandoning long held traditions. It is clear that Heschel had some issues with the ultra-Orthodox community in which he was raised, but it is also important to point out his deep

He moved to Vilna, where he learned at the secular Yiddish Real-Gymnasium. Having gained the necessary qualifications, he advanced to the University of Berlin to continue his matriculation.

Heschel never renounced his Orthodox roots,⁹ but in addition to his philosophy studies at the university, he decided to formally take classes at the liberal rabbinical seminary (Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums) as opposed to the Orthodox seminary (Hildesheimer).¹⁰ He seemed to have thought that as a result of his previous studies he had more to learn at the liberal seminary, where he would be introduced to the secular, historical, and scientific approach to the Bible, giving him a more well-rounded perspective and an ability to understand the Jewish communities outside of Orthodoxy. In addition, Heschel's Hassidic background did not fit comfortably in the Orthodox seminary, where they focused largely on Lithuanian legalism.¹¹

In Berlin, his interest in revitalizing Judaism attracted him to thinkers like David Koigen and Martin Buber, although it is important to mention that theologically Buber and Heschel were very distant, especially vis-à-vis their approach to man's relationship with God and the importance of traditional Jewish values like *halakhab*. Heschel once observed that “a car-

appreciation for the way of life the Eastern European Jews led and its influences on him. In an interview with Carl Stern, Heschel acknowledged, “I was very fortunate in having lived as a child and as a young boy in an environment where there were people I could revere, people concerned with problems of inner life, of spirituality and integrity.” Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), p. 395.

⁹ There are many instances shared by Heschel's German contemporaries about his strict observance of Halakha, which Edward Kaplan and Samuel H. Dresner recount in the first volume of their biography, *Prophetic Witness*. Dresner, his close student, also testified to his full observance while living in Berlin in his book *Heschel, Hassidism, and Halakha* (p. 117). In addition, he would consistently return to his family in Warsaw, with whom he maintained a good relationship even while living in Berlin. This relationship continued when Heschel moved to America. Even while employed as a professor in JTS, he continued to visit his ultra-Orthodox family on a regular basis.

¹⁰ Due to the close relationship Heschel held with the students and faculty at the Orthodox seminary, many were at a loss as to why he decided to learn officially at the liberal seminary. It is clear that his choice was not a spiritually significant one—he never planned on becoming a liberal or reformed rabbi, and often confronted the views held by the seminary faculty.

¹¹ For more on Heschel's decision to study at the liberal seminary, see chapter six of *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Prophetic Witness*.

dinal error of Martin Buber's" was "his rejection of the regimen of *halakhab* in the belief that nothing must restrain the freedom of human response to a particular situation."¹²

Prophetic Theology

His years in Berlin while the Nazis rose to power were decisive in formulating Heschel's thinking. There he began publishing works of theology and it was in that context that he came to his conclusion that western philosophy was not faithful to traditional Biblical values and had failed in its attempt to create a moral society. The Germany which reared the architects of the greatest systematic slaughter of human beings was at the same time the height of modernity. It gave birth to some of the greatest cultural and scientific achievements in modern history but, Heschel recognized, it detached its academia from the life of humanity.

The answers offered were unrelated to the problems, indifferent to the travail of a person who became aware of man's suspended sensitivity in the face of stupendous challenge, indifferent to a situation in which good and evil became irrelevant, in which man became increasingly callous to catastrophe and ready to suspend the principle of truth.¹³

He suggested not only that its philosophy could not be trusted but that it was unable to confront man's most pressing issue: his unrelenting "expediency"—viewing things as nothing more than material for the gratification of desires—which obstructed any possibility of developing true concern for the dignity of others. In Heschel's mind, a complete reorientation of man's attitude towards his surroundings was necessary. Rejecting the ethical approach of Western philosophy, namely that truth alone could inspire moral commitment, he suggested that any ethical teaching detached from the total problem of being human was doomed to fail. Commitment to moral values, and in turn concern for others, depends on the moments that bring about the attachment to faith, something that Western ethical philosophy had ignored.

Thus, he advocated a return to Biblical monotheism in which man sees God not as a *symbol* but as a *being present and concerned* with mankind,

¹² Samuel H. Dresner, *Heschel, Hasidism, and Halakha* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), p. 87; for further critique of Buber by Heschel see his interview at Notre Dame published in the appendices of *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*.

¹³ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2001), pp. xxviii.

which man could no longer ignore. This led Heschel to develop his central claim: that religion is meant to move man from an egocentric world view to a theocentric one, in which man becomes aware that God is the subject and all things are objects of his concern. He strove to convey that “all values are esteemed only to the extent that they are worthy in the sight of God,” and to inspire in his students a form of self-transcendence in which they realized that “the self is not the hub, but the spoke of the revolving wheel in which God is the center.”¹⁴ For Heschel this was likewise the essence of prayer:

In prayer the “I” becomes an “it.” This is the discovery: what is an “I” to me is, first of all and essentially, an “it” to God. If it is God’s mercy that lends eternity to a speck of being which is usually described as a self, then prayer begins as a moment of living as an “it” in the presence of God.¹⁵

This analysis of expediency, Heschel’s most fundamental critique of modernity, and the understanding that only religion, as an answer to the total situation of man, could enable a change was what drove him to his Biblical theology. The attempts religious leaders made to turn religion into another permutation of Western philosophical thinking were, in Heschel’s eyes, intolerable;¹⁶ many rabbis were content with their congregants praying to an “idea” instead of a God who listened, something Heschel detested.

He realized that replacing God as a being involved in history with God as an unmoved symbol of perfection and truth,¹⁷ in a society whose main concern was self-expression, would quickly lead to the abandonment of religion, paving the way for the further dehumanization of man by a consumerist society preaching utilitarianism and unbridled expediency. “There is a strange cunning in the fact that when man looks only at

¹⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man’s Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1954), p. 7.

¹⁵ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967), p. 255.

¹⁶ In fact, Heschel famously argues that religion itself, when Biblical language is persistently interpreted as symbolic, becomes worship of man’s own inventions; worship becomes self-expression and religion turns into a form of “solipsism.” Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man’s Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1954), p. 129.

¹⁷ See also in his introduction to *The Prophets* quoted below. Although this was largely a critique of the more liberal denominations, Orthodoxy’s emphasis on *halakhab* can be seen as parallel, something which will be touched upon later in the essay.

that which is useful, he eventually becomes useless to himself. The instrumentalization of the world leads to the *disintegration of man*.¹⁸ Thus, in his doctoral dissertation, an examination of the significance the prophetic experience held for the prophet, Heschel laid the foundations for what was to become his theology of self-transcendence, intended to counter the unabated expediency—or self-assertion—of modernity.

New Beginning in America

Narrowly escaping the Nazis, with the help of Hebrew Union College's president Julian Morgenstern,¹⁹ Heschel gained entrance into the United States. After his emigration in 1940 and adjustment to American culture, he was struck by the extreme secularization of Judaism he experienced during his first five years living at the reform Hebrew Union College campus. In 1945, Heschel began teaching at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York where he became Professor of Jewish Ethics and Mysticism and taught there until his death in 1972.

Through his writing he was able to reach a broader audience, and because of his focus not just on Judaism but on religion and Biblical religions in general, he was praised not only by Jewish leaders but also by some of the most prominent Christian leaders of his time.²⁰ While he began setting forth his theology he had an additional goal in mind for his writing. As Edward Kaplan points out, “Although esteemed as a philosopher of Judaism some professionals reproach him for being ‘a poet’—as if his beau-

¹⁸ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967), p. 41.

¹⁹ In 1939, supported by his board of governors, Morgenstern began attempts to save as many European Jewish scholars as possible by offering them positions at the college. Although Heschel's first place of residence was the Hebrew Union College campus, he never felt comfortable there due to the differences in their theological outlooks. He did, however, feel eternally grateful to them.

²⁰ Heschel became the first rabbi ever appointed to the faculty of the Protestant Union Theological Seminary in New York. In 12 weeks of classes in Jewish philosophy and theology, he drew more students than any previous visiting professor in the school's history. Reinhold Niebuhr, arguably the most important Protestant theologian of the twentieth century in America, said about Heschel after the publication of *Man is Not Alone*, “It is a safe guess that he will become a commanding and authoritative voice not only in the Jewish community but in the religious life of America.” The two shared a close relationship after that and as neighbors often took walks together.

tiful style automatically precluded intellectual rigor. They did not understand how Heschel used poetic rhetoric as a means of provoking religious insight.”²¹

The values Heschel promulgated in his writing were shared by the Orthodox community. Although he didn't demand his students' commitment to an Orthodox standard of observance, Maurice Friedman, a student of his, wrote that “he made it very clear that fulfilling the Law was the way to real participation in Judaism, or as he writes in *God in Search of Man*, ‘the holy dimension of existence’.”²²

While lecturing widely throughout the United States and continuing his extensive writings, his pedagogy expanded beyond solely theological expositions. Heschel eventually gained prominence in the civil rights movement. He had a close friendship with Martin Luther King, Jr. and would suspend his classes to join protests against discrimination. Eventually, his outspokenness drew reproach from his peers, and his criticism of the American government's involvement in the Vietnam war disenchanted many of his followers. Still, Heschel wouldn't capitulate. Enraged at indifference, Heschel devoted his life to fighting the apathy which drew him to his public involvement in those affairs. He felt it paradoxical to care for God's concerns and yet remain quiet in the face of man's cruelty. As Heschel famously remarked, “in regard to cruelties committed in the name of a free society, some are guilty, while all are responsible.”²³

While some Jewish leaders at the time were opposed to interfaith dialogue, Heschel's unique position of influence on Christian thinking enabled him to help mend the relationship between Jews and Christians. He felt that interfaith dialogue was a necessity and warned that its alternative would be “inter-nihilism.” While standing firmly against Christian missionary activity towards Jews, he urged Christians to recognize the significance of Judaism to their own religion. Additionally, Heschel advocated that the Church not blame all Jews for deicide, and that it condemn Christian anti-Semitism. Both were achieved at the Second Vatican Council.

His activism was not separate from his theological attitude. Rather, his activism was a logical outcome of the way Heschel viewed religion. It was reminiscent of his description of “Maimonides's last transformation” as one “from contemplation to practice, from knowledge to the imitation

²¹ Edward K. Kaplan and Samuel H. Dresner, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Prophetic Witness* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 92.

²² Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber's Life and Work* (Boston: Dutton, 1982), p. 191.

²³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), p. 222.

of God. God was not only the object of knowledge. He was the Model one should follow.”²⁴

Heschel suffered a heart attack in 1969. In his last three years he remained active, even traveling to Italy for a lecture tour, until in 1972 on a Shabbat evening he passed away in his sleep. The friends who attended his funeral ranged from his Hassidic family to gentile public officials. The odd assortment of people at the proceedings were illustrative of Heschel's deep love for all of Israel and his ability to treat all people with dignity, enabling the close relationships he held across a wide spectrum of affiliations. His extensive writings remain an inspiration to many and his legacy continues to enjoy resonance throughout the religious world.

A Misguided Rejection

I would like to preface the discussion of Heschel's rejection by the Orthodox community with a short anecdote. While teaching at JTS, a student of Heschel's once approached him and asked, “Rabbi, bottom line, are you Conservative or are you Orthodox?” Heschel replied, “I am not a noun in search of an adjective.” Regardless of the story's veracity, it's reasonable to assume that Heschel viewed these terms as both limiting and unhelpful. With a growing disunity between the Jewish affiliations, being a critic of all sides Heschel likely saw these terms as detrimental to each of the denominations. Therefore, attempting to call Heschel Orthodox would be wrong, as he himself would never do so. I only wish to show that there should be no fear in discussing his works among the Orthodox community.

Many who are unfamiliar with Heschel's writing assume that he was an archetypal Conservative rabbi, teaching Conservative values.²⁵ Beyond this misconception there are two main reasons for the absence of his teachings among Orthodox Jewry. (1) The first is the fact that Heschel decided to teach at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS), the

²⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Maimonides* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982), p. 243; Interestingly Heschel's move to activism was around the time he worked on revising for English publication his thesis on the prophets, who he saw as the ultimate models of activism. In an interview he unsurprisingly explained that it was this project that convinced him that he must become involved in human affairs.

²⁵ What's ironic is that Heschel was in fact disliked by many of the JTS faculty for a variety of reasons, some because they felt that he did not share their values. This caused Heschel to receive an unassuming teaching position at the institution and a very small office, so small, in fact, that he had to keep some of his books and manuscripts on bookshelves outside his office after his many attempts to have this changed went ignored.

bastion of Conservative Judaism, an institution increasingly separating itself from mainstream Orthodoxy. (2) The second reason was the strong emphasis he put on the philosophical and theological sides of Judaism, *aggadic* as it is often termed, and his lack of emphasis on demanding his students' commitment to *halakhab*. This was also a cause for tension between himself and the major Orthodox leader at the time, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. These issues are inadequate reasons to be fearful of his work and I would like to address each.

Firstly, I would like to confront the assertion that Heschel's credibility is to be questioned because he taught at JTS. While it is reasonable to take caution when dealing with rabbis affiliated with other denominations, a rabbi questioning the legitimacy of a person's theological position and ostracizing that person's work ought to first be familiar with his views. Nothing heretical or in any way antithetical to Orthodox views is found in any of Heschel's books and most who make this claim do so before actually reading them. While it is true that there have been critiques of Heschel's philosophy/theology of pathos, whether those critiques were well founded or not, his ideas would not lead to the degradation of Orthodoxy. Furthermore, those ideas are only modern reiterations of classical ideas found in works as early as the Talmud,²⁶ not his own innovations. Much of the criticism in the Orthodox community regarding the content of Heschel's work is devoid of any real substance.

The lack of honest discussion surrounding Heschel's work stems from the inherent problem people have with reading the works of any Conservative Jew whose values differ from mainstream Orthodoxy. From an educational perspective this concern may be relevant to those who have yet to develop a religious conviction strong enough to be fairly challenged. Persistently shying away from those challenges, however, tends to become detrimental. A person who assumes that religious truth is exclusively limited to his perception of Orthodoxy has thus abandoned an authentic search for it. Exchange of ideas among those who differ is what allows growth in thought. Furthermore, as made clear above, in his writings Heschel makes an obvious distinction between his thought and that of the Conservative movement. This can be seen especially clearly in his criticism of the different religious attitudes in his book "Man's Quest for God,"²⁷ and from the numerous places in which he discusses the importance of *halakhab*, regarding which many among the Conservative movement's leaders were more moderate.

²⁶ This was the focus of Heschel's work, *Torah Min Hashamayim*.

²⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man's Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), pp. 53–57.

These arguments may not fully reassure those who remain disturbed that Heschel turned down a position at Yeshiva University, the mainstream Orthodox institute, to instead accept appointment at the Conservative one. (Yeshiva University's attempts to procure Heschel as an educator expresses something about how Heschel should be viewed. Some of its rabbis praised Heschel.) Concern over this choice, however, is mitigated when both Heschel's and JTS's histories are taken into account. As explained above, Heschel saw his mission as revitalizing Judaism primarily through fighting its secularization. This was his goal in Berlin while affiliated with the liberal rabbinical seminary and the Lehrhaus²⁸ in Frankfurt, and it is clear throughout his writing. For obvious reasons, he deemed the problem more urgent in the Conservative movement. Furthermore, at the time of Heschel's employment, the Conservative movement was not yet disconnected from the Orthodox movement to the extent that it is currently—in fact, most of the rabbis on faculty were also Orthodox Jews, many of whom had fled Nazi Germany.²⁹ Therefore, Heschel's association with JTS should not be equated with teaching at a reform institution or even with what JTS has now come to represent.

Finally, it is likely that Heschel was attracted to the Conservative movement's openness in permitting his main focus to be on an understanding of faith and the philosophy of religion and Judaism as opposed to strict *halakhic* observance. Still, this should not be misconstrued as a disregard for *halakhab*, as seen in a meeting with the students from Hebrew Union College, the major reform institute, where he told them:

I am not an Halakhist. My field is *Aggada*... But remember, there is no *Aggada* without *Halakha*. There can be no Jewish holiness without Jewish law, at least the essence of Jewish Law. Jewish theology and *tefillin* go together... Why are you afraid of wearing *talis* and *tefillin*

²⁸ The Judische Lehrhaus was established in 1920 by Franz Rosenzweig to counteract the German standard of aloof, scientific specialists and launch a revolution in Jewish culture, reaching out to Jews who were lacking in religious knowledge. As Buber, then head of the Lehrhaus, made his transition to Israel he appointed Heschel to take up many of his responsibilities there.

²⁹ An astounding letter reproduced in Marc Shapiro's *Professor Saul Lieberman and the Orthodox* illustrates the ambiguity of JTS's position in relation to the Orthodox community during the institutes' early years. In the letter, written in 1936, Rabbi Moshe Halevi Soloveitchik wrote to Louis Ginzberg, by then one of the most respected professors on the faculty of JTS, to recommend Rabbi Yitzchok Hutner for a teaching position at the school. This was the same Rabbi Hutner that eventually became the Rosh Yeshiva of the ultra-Orthodox Yeshiva Rabbi Chaim Berlin.

every morning, my friends? There was a time when our adjustment to Western civilization was our supreme problem... By now we are all well adjusted... Our task today is to adjust Western civilization to Judaism. America, for example, needs Shabbos. What is wrong with Shabbos, with saying a *brokcho* every time we eat, with regularity of prayer? What is wrong with spiritual discipline? It is only out of such spiritual discipline that a new manifestation of human existence will emerge. I say *human* and not Jewish existence, because Judaism, which can be very concrete, answers universal problems...³⁰

(2) This leads to the second reason for the absence of Heschel's work in Orthodox communities, namely his lack of demanding full commitment by his students to an Orthodox level of halachic observance. Heschel both wrote about and discussed the importance of *halakhab*,³¹ as I have already shown above, and it is a common misconception that he did not place an emphasis on adherence to Jewish law. To understand, though, why he refused to demand it above all else, it would be helpful to bring a quote from Heschel's book *Man's Quest for God*, in which he criticizes an approach to Judaism which he called "religious behaviorism." Although he doesn't explicitly state that it was aimed at the ultra-Orthodox (and to a large extent the Modern Orthodox) communities, the implication is quite clear:

There are people who seem to believe that religious deeds can be performed in a spiritual wasteland, in the absence of the soul, with a heart hermetically sealed; the external action is the essential mode of worship, pedantry the same as piety; as if all that mattered is how men behave in physical terms; as if religion were not concerned with the inner life.

Such a conception, which we would like to call religious behaviorism, unwittingly reduces Judaism to a sort of sacred physics, with no sense for the imponderable, the introspective, the metaphysical.

As a personal attitude religious behaviorism usually reflects a widely held theology in which the supreme article of faith is *respect for tradition*. People are urged to observe the rituals or attend services out of

³⁰ Samuel H. Dresner, *Heschel, Hasidism, and Halakha* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), pp. 92–93.

³¹ See, for example, Heschel's essay in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* titled "Toward an Understanding of Halacha;" his essay "The Individual Jew and His Obligations" in *The Insecurity of Freedom*, chapter 25 "A Pattern for Living" in *Man Is Not Alone*; Part 3 of *God in Search of Man*; and Samuel H. Dresner, *Heschel, Hasidism, and Halakha*.

deference to what has come down to us from our ancestors. The *theology of respect* pleads for the maintenance of the inherited and transmitted customs and institutions and is characterized by a spirit of conformity, excessive moderation and disrespect of spontaneity.... Wise, important, essential and pedagogically useful as the principle “respect for tradition” is, it is grotesque and self-defeating to make it the supreme article of faith.³²

It is evident that to Heschel the *halakhic act* was not the essence of religion, despite its importance. Thus, he was able to act with leniency towards his students regarding the Orthodox standards of halachic observance when speaking to those for whom *halakhab* was not even a concern. This was difficult for rabbis who had raised *halakhab* to the point where it became an end in and of itself. Instead, unsurprisingly, Heschel’s emphasis was on man’s relationship to a God who is present and moved by man. Heschel was attempting to reestablish the source of faith and return religion to a meaningful lifestyle for people who had already abandoned compliance to the law. As he wrote, “The crisis is wider, the anguish is deeper. What is at stake is not only articles of creed, paragraphs of the law; what is at stake is the humanity of man, the nearness of God.”³³

In Heschel’s essay *The Individual Jew and His Obligations*, he states clearly his reason for approaching Jewish education without a demand for complete Halachic observance:

There is also the notion that you observe *everything or nothing*; all rules are of equal importance; and if one brick is removed, the whole edifice must collapse. Such intransigence, laudable as it may be as an expression of devoutness, is neither historically nor theologically justified. There were ages in Jewish history when some aspects of Jewish ritual observance were not adhered to by people who otherwise lived according to the Law. And where is the man who could claim that he has been able to fulfill literally the *mitzvah* of “Love thy neighbor as thyself”?

Intransigence is not the way to this generation. For since only a small minority of those who have forsaken the traditional way of living is prepared to accept the maximum, this notion drives away the overwhelming majority....

³² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man’s Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1954), pp. 55–56.

³³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), p. 295.

Torah as *a total way of living* has been abandoned by the multitude of our people, and we cannot force it upon them. We must evolve *a pedagogy of return*; we must devise *a ladder of observance*. We have no right to abrogate the *Halakhab*, but we have also no right to abandon the Jewish people. Extremism, minimalism is not the way. Elasticity, flexibility is the way.³⁴

Alongside these issues, tension between Heschel and Rav Soloveitchik must have impacted his dismissal by many Modern Orthodox rabbis. Rav Soloveitchik was a highly respected figure in American Jewry and a leader of Modern Orthodoxy. While Heschel famously criticized Rav Soloveitchik's essay *Halakhik Man*, stating that there was never a concept of *Halakhik Man* in Jewish thought,³⁵ Rav Soloveitchik was quoted as saying about Heschel's *The Sabbath*, "What does he [Heschel] call Shabbat?—a sanctuary in time. This is an idea of a poet. It's a lovely idea. But what is Shabbat? Shabbat is *lamed-tet melakbot*, it is the thirty-nine categories of work and their *toladot*, and it is out of that *halakhab* and not of poetry that you have to construct a theory of Shabbat."³⁶ Their confrontation was similar to that which Heschel must have felt at the Lithuanian style Orthodox Seminary in Berlin and the disagreements he had at JTS with Saul Lieberman.

Lastly, it is worthwhile to recognize that while the legacy of Heschel is seen chiefly among Conservative Jews, it is an unfair critique of Heschel's content to point that out as a flaw. Those who have studied Heschel's work and are associated with the Conservative community were Conservative to begin with; his ostracism from the Orthodox communities has precluded the possibility of him gaining any sort of mainstream recognition among the Orthodox. Heschel's work is not known to sway

³⁴ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967), pp. 205–6. It is worth mentioning Arnold Eisen's essay *Re-reading Heschel on the commandments*, which points out that Heschel's philosophy of Halakha and its goals for creating a spiritual discipline can lead to the conclusion that individual Laws are replaceable. Although, Heschel advocated 'translating the biblical commandments into programs required by our own conditions' not replacing them.

³⁵ See Samuel H. Dresner, *Heschel, Hasidism, and Halakha* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), p. 102 for Heschel's full comments on the book.

³⁶ Jonathan Sacks, "A Hespel in Honor of Rav Yosef Soloveitchik," *Memories of a Giant: Eulogies in Memory of Rabbi Dr. Joseph B. Soloveitchik ז"ל*, Michael A. Bierman, ed. (Jerusalem/New York: Urim Publications, 2003), pp. 286–287.

people from Orthodox to Conservative beliefs. In fact, many of his Conservative students had become more observant.³⁷

Throughout my time studying Heschel's corpus of work and books and essays written about him, I was immensely disturbed by widespread lies about him. Without legitimate justification, his legacy has been tarnished. The beauty and complexity of his writing has been ignored because of baseless fear.

I wrote this piece because I felt an urgency to expose this misrepresentation and to restore Heschel's status as a prominent Jewish thinker among Orthodoxy. His ideas are as relevant to Orthodoxy as they ever were to Conservative and Reformed Jewry, and our communities can benefit from the work that so many others have found inspiring.

Unfortunately, his rejection by the Orthodox community hints at a deeper issue of close-mindedness and exclusion of ideas that would enhance the religious conviction of its members. As Heschel tried to convey in his last year in an address he gave in Israel about the hardening of Orthodoxy, "Alas, the spirit of Satmar hovers over our rabbis, while Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev [known for his love of every Jew] has been forgotten... Their leaders are busy erecting new fences and walls, instead of building a house for people to live in. As a result, Judaism looks like a jail to the young, instead of a fountain of life and joy..."³⁸

Part 2: Theology

The Failure of Western Philosophy

There are people who are hesitant to take seriously the possibility of our knowing what the will of God demands of us. Yet we all wholeheartedly accept Micah's words: "He has showed you, O man, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). If we believe that there is something which God requires of man, then what is our belief if not *faith in the will of God, certainty of*

³⁷ There are those who point to Heschel's lack of Kippa as a statement that he must not have felt obligated to Halakha. This again is a mistake. Heschel never decided he wouldn't wear a *kippa*. He always put a *kippa* on if he was conscious of that fact that it had fallen off (this sometimes went unnoticed due to his long hair). He always made sure to have one on when praying or making a blessing. This was told to me personally by his daughter Susannah Heschel.

³⁸ Samuel H. Dresner, *Heschel, Hasidism, and Halakha* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), p. 111. It is worth also mentioning that Heschel was immensely disturbed by the secular nature of the Jewish State. Much of his writing on Israel was a call for the state to become a religious and spiritual beacon.

knowing what his will demands of us? If we are ready to believe that God requires of me “to do justice,” is it more difficult for us to believe that God requires of us to be Holy? If we are ready to believe that it is God who requires of us “to love kindness,” is it more difficult to believe that God requires us to hallow the Sabbath and not violate its sanctity?

If it is the word of Micah uttering the will of God that we believe in, and not a peg on which to hang views we derived from rationalist philosophies, then “to love justice” is just as much law as the prohibition of making a fire on the Seventh Day. If, however, all we hear in these words are echoes of western philosophy rather than the voice of Micah, does that not mean that the prophet has nothing to say to any of us?³⁹

This idea, written by Heschel in 1954, is the basis of his theology, which he began to set forth in his doctoral dissertation in Berlin twenty years earlier. In his thesis, Heschel attempted to show that what the prophets were expressing, though externally similar to the morals which came from Western philosophy, were intrinsically different. “The Bible... has not coined many words, but it has given new meaning to borrowed words.”⁴⁰ The root of this difference stems from the source which grants value to those morals. Whereas Western philosophy employed truth as the foundation for their ethics, in Judaism the prophetic experience lent value to the laws through the prophet’s ability to recognize their importance to God by “sympathizing” with His concerns.

Western religious thought has been dominated by the influence of its philosophic counterpart. The impact of the Aristotelian worldview and its perception of God is seen clearly in medieval thinkers like Maimonides, who in a large part have shaped our theological outlook. The legacy of Spanish Jewry, which can be seen “in some respects as a synthesis of Jewish tradition and Moslem civilization... often seemed to emphasize the elements Judaism had in common with classical philosophy to the neglect of pointing out its own specific features.”⁴¹ Or as Heschel writes in *God in Search of Man*, “by dwelling upon the common elements of reason and revelation, a synthesis of the two spiritual powers was attained at the price

³⁹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man's Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), p. 103.

⁴⁰ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2001), p. 354.

⁴¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Earth is the Lord's* (Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1995), p. 25.

of sacrificing some of their unique insights.”⁴² For many people, these ideas have formed their approach to Judaism, whether consciously or not.⁴³

In the introduction to the English edition of his dissertation, expanded into his book *The Prophets*, Heschel tells of an understanding he came to while learning philosophy in Berlin:

What drove me to study the prophets?

In the academic environment in which I spent my student years philosophy had become an isolated, self-subsisting, self-indulgent entity, a *Ding an sich*, encouraging suspicion instead of love of wisdom. The answers offered were unrelated to the problems, indifferent to the travail of a person who became aware of man’s suspended sensitivity in the face of stupendous challenge, indifferent to a situation in which good and evil became irrelevant, in which man became increasingly callous to catastrophe and ready to suspend the principle of truth. I was slowly led to the realization that some of the terms, motivations, and concerns which dominate our thinking may prove destructive of the roots of human responsibility and treasonable to the ultimate ground of human solidarity. The challenge we are all exposed to, and the dreadful shame that shatters our capacity for inner peace, defy the ways and patterns of our thinking. One is forced to admit that some of the causes and motives of our thinking have led our existence astray, that speculative prosperity is no answer to spiritual bankruptcy. It was the realization that the right coins were not available in the common currency that drove me to study the thought of the prophets.⁴⁴

At a time of unspeakable tragedy, when “emblazoned over the gates of the world in which we live is the escutcheon of the demons,” when “the mark of Cain in the face of man has come to overshadow the likeness of God,”⁴⁵ Heschel realized that a philosophy based solely on truth and “speculative prosperity” could not inspire in man true concern for others.

⁴² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: The Noonday Press Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), p. 15.

⁴³ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967), pp. 238–239.

⁴⁴ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2001), pp. xxviii.

⁴⁵ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man’s Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1954), p. 147.

What was needed, Heschel asserted, was a return to a personal God who repudiates indifference:

I have tried to elucidate some of the presuppositions that lie at the root of prophetic theology, fundamental attitudes of prophetic religion, and to call attention to how they differ from certain presuppositions and attitudes that prevail in other systems of theology and religion. While stressing the certainty of pathos, a term which takes on major importance in the course of the discussion, I have tried not to lose sight of the ethos and logos in the teaching.⁴⁶

Here Heschel introduces his concept of Pathos, which is in contrast to the understanding of God that has been influenced by ancient Greek philosophy. With his knowledge of the history of philosophy, Heschel was distinctively suited to legitimize what he saw as the most authentically Biblical attitude towards God.

The Problems of Hellenized Judaism

Speaking to a group of Rabbis at a conference in New York, Heschel broached an issue he saw as the cause of great problems in the secularization of Judaism and the obstruction of its ability to teach man real transitive concern:

There is another danger, another block to Jewish theology. This danger is a more insidious one. I refer to the Hellenization of Jewish theology... To oversimplify the matter: this approach would have Plato and Moses, for example, say the same thing. Only, Plato would say it in Greek and Moses in Hebrew. Consequently, you can say that Moses was a sort of Hebrew Plato. This view has had a great impact on much of Jewish medieval philosophy. They talk about God in the language of the Greeks.

... We are inclined to think in non-Jewish terms. I am not discouraging exposure to the non-Jewish world. I am merely indicating that it is not biblical thinking. It is not rabbinic thinking. It is not Hassidic thinking. It is non-Jewish thinking. A non-Jewish philosophy is fine. But we would also like to have in our thinking a Jewish view of things... If you take biblical passages or biblical documents or rabbinic statements, and submit them to a Greek mind, they are often absurd. They make no sense... May I say to you personally that this

⁴⁶ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2001) pp. xxviii–xxix.

has been my major challenge, ever since I began working on my dissertation; that is: How to maintain a Jewish way of thinking? This was the major concern and the major thesis of my dissertation *Die Prophetes*.⁴⁷

In the second part of *The Prophets*, as in several other places, Heschel explained why he rejected the Greek God of complete actualization or being, instead introducing God as an omnipotent but passable God of Pathos, in need of man. As he wrote, “Plato thinks of God *in the image of an idea*; the prophets think of God *in the image of personal presence*. To the prophets God was not a Being of Whose existence they were convinced in the way in which a person is convinced of the truth of an idea. He was a Being Who is supremely real and staggeringly present.”⁴⁸ Heschel did “not offer a systematic essay in metaphysics,” as Shai Held states; “he was content, instead, to point out that the metaphysical principles Maimonides simply took for granted are in fact historically conditioned—of Greek rather than biblical provenance.”⁴⁹

To give a comprehensive overview of his rejection is beyond the scope of this essay; I will only point briefly to the way Heschel went about discrediting the Greek approach as unbiblical and why he deemed that vital. It should first be stated that Heschel did not intend to go so far as to claim a conceptualization of God’s essence: “The idea of divine pathos is not a personification of God but an exemplification of divine reality, an illustration or illumination of His concern. It does not represent a substance, but an act or a relationship.”⁵⁰ In fact, to make such a contention would be to misunderstand the root of Heschel’s issue with Greek thinking.

According to the celebrated statement of Xenophanes, ‘If oxen and horses and lions had hands or could draw with hands and create works of art like those made by men, horses would draw pictures of gods like horses, and oxen of gods like oxen...’ The essential error is not in *how* man depicts God, but in depicting Him at all. The great revolution in biblical faith was to regard any image of God as an abomination.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), pp. 155–156.

⁴⁸ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2001), p. 353.

⁴⁹ Shai Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013), p. 144.

⁵⁰ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2001), p. 351.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 349.

In the Bible, Heschel observed, there is no discussion of God that is parallel to the God of Aristotle. The fundamental notions upon which Greek thought stands are absent:

The notion of God as a perfect Being is not of biblical origin. It is not a product of prophetic religion, but of Greek philosophy... In the Decalogue, God does not speak of His perfection, but of His having made free men out of slaves. Signifying a state of being without defect and lack, perfection is a term of praise which we may utter in pouring forth emotion; yet, for man to utter it as a name for His essence would mean to evaluate and to endorse Him. Biblical language is free of such pretensions; it dared to call perfect (*tamim*) only "His work" (Deut. 32:4), "His way" (II Sam. 22:31), and the Torah (Ps. 19:7). We have never been told: "Hear, O Israel, God is Perfect!"⁵²

In contrast Heschel states:

To the prophet... God does not reveal Himself in an abstract absoluteness, but in a personal and intimate relation to the world. He does not simply command and expect obedience; He is also moved and affected by what happens in the world and reacts accordingly. Events and human actions arouse in Him joy or sorrow, pleasure or wrath... Quite obviously in the biblical view, man's deeds may move Him, affect Him, grieve Him or, on the other hand, gladden and please Him. This notion that God can be intimately affected, that He possesses not merely intelligence and will, but also pathos, basically defines the prophetic consciousness of God.⁵³

He subsequently elucidates the metaphysical assumptions which caused the Greek thinkers and those Jewish theologians influenced by them to arrive at a notion of God as an unchanging and unaffected being of complete unity. He then explicates the difficulties that lie in attempting to reconcile it with the God of the Bible, and suggests that:

These difficulties arise from the attempt to reduce the biblical insight to an exact rational category. To be sure, the rational component is central to the biblical understanding of unity. However, the biblical intention is not to stress an abstraction, an idea in general, but the fullness of the divine Being; the certainty that the creator *is* the Redeemer, that the Lord of nature *is* the Lord of history. *God's* being One means more than just being one. It means, we may say, that He

⁵² Ibid. p. 352.

⁵³ Ibid. pp. 288–289.

is One, not many; unique and only (one-ly), the center and the circle, all-embracing and involved.⁵⁴

This was Heschel's chief issue with the Hellenized understanding. He recognized its incapability to remain consistent with the Biblical narrative, in which Heschel saw God in search of man as the major theme. The Bible is not man's theology, Heschel would say, but God's anthropology. No Aristotelian theologian could coherently synthesize his philosophical assumptions with what was in Heschel's eyes this undisputable motif:

Ribono Shel Olam [master of the universe], why do you bother? Why are you in search of man? Why are you still searching and waiting? Searching for whoever it is that may come? To create a better world; to create a better species? God in search of man? Why? And my answer to this would be: Because God is in *need* of man. The idea of God being in need of man is central to Judaism and pervades all the pages of the Bible, of Chazal, of Talmudic literature...⁵⁵

As an additional contention, Heschel did not think the Greek approach could be justified by man's experience and therefore lacks the ability to truly inspire moral commitment to its ideals. He concludes in *The Prophets*:

It is of extreme importance that theology should endeavor to operate with categories indigenous to the insights of depth-theology instead of borrowing its categories from speculative philosophy or science. What is regarded as the ultimate in philosophy must not be regarded as the ultimate in theology. What man thinks or what man says is the ultimate theme of philosophical analysis. To theology, the ultimate theme is that which man is unable to objectify, which he refuses to conceptualize.⁵⁶

Heschel's discord with the Greek understanding was not only in the way they expressed God but the way in which they approached an understanding of Him:

⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 343.

⁵⁵ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), p. 159.

⁵⁶ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2001), p. 340. As Shai Held points out, Heschel's claim is not lack of omnipotence but a choice of self-restraint on God's side. Thus, "the meaning of covenant is, at bottom, not that God needs man, but that *God has chosen to need man.*" Shai Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013), p. 10.

As important as the content of our thinking about God is our way of thinking about Him. There is a reflective way, commencing in ignorance and rising from concept to concept until it arrives at the idea of One Supreme Being described by the attribute of perfection. The other way begins in embarrassment, and, rising from insight to insight, arrives at a vision of one transcendent Being, whom one acknowledges as a source of embarrassment. One cannot describe Him, one can only praise Him.⁵⁷

Thus, on three accounts Heschel rejected the Greek approach. First, he rejected it for its inability to reconcile its notion of a God who is essentially disconnected from any created being, devoid of transitive concern, with the God of the Bible who Heschel contends is full of transitive concern.⁵⁸ In contrast to the Greek influenced rendering, in which no descriptive content of God's relationship with man—be it His love or anger—could be taken in any literal sense, to Heschel, “divine concern... is the stuff of which prophecy is made.”⁵⁹

The incapacity to take seriously God's concern would make the prophets' sympathy with His pathos absurd. While the speculative approach would reject anything that seems to defy the Greek concept of being, Heschel did not recognize our inability to conceptualize nothingness as proof of Being's ultimate nature, thus precluding an ability for God to defy perfect being-ness.⁶⁰ This leads to the second aspect, which is that speculative insights seem to defy those of depth-theology (discussed in the following part), which Heschel sees as the root of true faith, born from man's ability for intellectual humility in the face of that before which all words fail: “that which lies within our reach but beyond our grasp.”⁶¹

⁵⁷ Ibid. pp. 351–352.

⁵⁸ “The God of the philosophers is all indifference, too sublime to possess a heart or to cast a glance at our world. His wisdom consists in being conscious of Himself and oblivious to the world. In contrast, the God of the prophets is all concern, to merciful to remain aloof to His creation.” Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man is Not Alone* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), p. 244.

⁵⁹ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2001), p. 279.

⁶⁰ As noted earlier, Heschel's goal here was to legitimize other metaphysical perspectives, allowing his rejection of the Greek assumptions for the reasons I expounded upon.

⁶¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man is Not Alone* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), pp. 4–5.

Lastly, Heschel argues that ethics born out of speculative philosophy do not account for man's whole situation and therefore cannot inspire true moral commitment. As he avers, "a first cause or an idea of the absolute—devoid of freedom, devoid of life—is an issue for science or metaphysics rather than a concern of the soul or the conscience... The living soul is not concerned with a dead cause but a living God."⁶²

Depth-Theology

I would now like to shift the discussion to the idea of depth-theology in Heschel's work and its relationship to his understanding of Biblical thinking. In the beginning of Heschel's philosophy of religion, he observes that the most important question of religion is not whether man can prove God philosophically or scientifically, for

... granted that the existence of a being endowed with supreme genius and wisdom has been demonstrated, the question remains: why should we, poor creatures, be concerned about Him, the most perfect? We may, indeed, accept the idea that there is a supreme designer and still say: "So what?" As long as a concept of God does not overpower us, as long as we can say: "So what?"—it is not God that we talk about but something else...

The issue which philosophy of religion has to discuss first is not belief, ritual or the religious experience, but the source of all these phenomena: the total situation of man; not what or how he experiences the supernatural, but why he experiences and accepts it. The question is: What necessitates religion in my life and in yours?⁶³

Echoing this idea, in the first of a series of lectures he gave at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis on depth theology, he observed:

Religion has been reduced to institution, symbol, theology. It does not affect the pretheological situation, the presymbolic depth of existence. To redirect the trend, we must lay bare what is involved in religious existence; we must recover the situations which both precede and correspond to the theological formulations; we must recall the questions which religious doctrines are trying to answer, *the antecedents of religious commitment*, the presuppositions of faith. A major task

⁶² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: The Noonday Press Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), p. 125.

⁶³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man is Not Alone* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), pp. 54–55.

of philosophy of religion is, as said above, to rediscover the questions to which religion is an answer. The inquiry must proceed both by delving into the consciousness of man and by delving into the teachings and attitudes of the religious tradition.⁶⁴

Questions concerning the source of faith are the inquiry Heschel calls “depth theology.” While the “content of believing” is the theme of theology, “the theme of depth theology is the act of believing, its purpose being to explore the depth of faith, the substratum out of which belief arises.”⁶⁵ Creed is the subject of theology, faith that of depth theology. The two are interdependent—while depth theology is the source of man’s faith, theology must be the answer of how to live compatibly with that faith.

The concept of depth theology was the focus of Heschel’s first major American publication. Delving into the source of faith, Heschel attempted to illuminate those experiences which bring it about. He described those moments as meeting reality face to face. “There are three aspects of nature,” Heschel explains, “which command man’s attention: power, loveliness and grandeur. Power he exploits, loveliness he enjoys, grandeur fills him with awe.”⁶⁶ The first two are unambiguous but in probing man’s awe, the moments in which a person is overcome with wonder, Heschel asks why? What purpose does this wonder, evoked by the grandeur of man’s surroundings, serve him? What value does man gain when he ceases looking at the world as a tool for his own use and begins to see it without his preexisting perspectives? Yet no one, Heschel would suggest, who looks out across the vastness of the ocean, towards its infinite expanses, can see only a fishpond.

Man’s initial acquaintance with reality, his preconceptual awareness, if he works to detect it, is to sense the ineffable; suppression of awe can only last so long. While few bear the burden of relentless reflection, unable to drown out the call for authenticity, no one is immune to moments of awareness. Though few and far apart, they strike like lightning, breaking through our calloused shells and illuminating the dishonesty in which we live, imploring man to strive for more than self-assertion.

Disregard of the ultimate dimension of human existence is a possible state of mind as long as man finds tranquility in his dedication to partial

⁶⁴ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967), pp. 115–116.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 117–118.

⁶⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man is Not Alone* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979). p. 3.

objectives. But strange things happen at times to disturb his favorite unawareness, which makes it impossible for him not to realize that evasiveness is offensiveness.⁶⁷

Heschel attempted to inspire in his reader the awareness that there are situations in life during which one's ivory tower of egocentricity begins to crumble. Whether it occurs when man experiences the grandeur of nature, or when he is struck with the fleeting nature of time rushing past him, paying no heed to his attempts to ignore his own temporality. Be it in the radical amazement that overcomes man when he reflects on the fact that he is thinking, or his wonder in looking up at a sky filled with stars, when all words seem to fail.

Ultimately, in man's trepidation *when faced with what he cannot control*, feigning that his own self-worth is the extent of his self-expression will no longer suffice. As Heschel wrote, "the way to insanity is paved with such illusions."⁶⁸ With remarkable insight Heschel pointed out that reverence is never felt for the self. Stripped of the possibility to say that what exists is for his use, man's recognition of an ineffable transcendence that points to God, Heschel asserts, is rooted in his intuitive questioning about the purpose with which all things are imbued. In other words, "why is there something rather than nothing?" For unlike Greek man, the Biblical mind recognizes the possibility of both nothingness and existence, implied in the creation.

The purpose of depth theology, we have said, is not to establish a doctrine but to lay bare some of the roots of our being, stirred by the Ultimate Question.⁶⁹

We do not owe our ultimate question to stumbling in a mist of ignorance upon a wall of inscrutable riddles. We do not ask because of our being poor in spirit and bereft of knowledge; we ask because we sense a spirit which surpasses our ability to comprehend it. We owe our question not to something less but to something which is more than the known.⁷⁰

Wonder is not born out of scientific ignorance; in fact, science can enhance that wonder. Heschel is not describing a "God of the gaps," nor

⁶⁷ Abraham J. Heschel, *Who is Man* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1965), p. 53.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* p. 58.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* p. 124.

⁷⁰ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man is Not Alone* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), p. 61.

an “intelligent designer.” God is not an idea created to satisfy the rational conclusion that the existence of a watch necessitates a creator.

The shortcomings of this view lie in its taking both the watch and all of reality for granted. The ultimate problem is not only how it came into being, but also how is it that it is... *Is not the watch itself a mystery? Is not the act of my perceiving the watch and my comprehending its design a most incomprehensible fact?*⁷¹

God is not an explanation but part of the intuition itself.

The question about God is not a question about all things but a question of all things; not an inquiry into the unknown but an inquiry into that which all things stand for; a question we ask for all things. It is phrased not in categories of reason but in acts in which we are astir beyond words. The mind does not know how to phrase it, yet the soul sighs it, sings it, pleads it.⁷²

The true issue which science raises is not its attempts to disprove God but the almost necessary dulling of wonder caused by civilization's advancements.⁷³ “What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder,” says Heschel, and “the chief danger to philosophy of religion lies in the temptation... to explicate what is intrinsically inexplicable.”⁷⁴

Heschel rejects the claim that wonder is simply a psychological phenomenon and should be discarded as such, lacking any capacity of informing man of something about reality.

We do not sense the mystery because we feel a need for it, just as we do not notice the ocean or the sky because we have a desire to see them. The sense of mystery is not a product of our will. It may be suppressed by the will but it is not generated by it. The mystery is not the product of a need, it is a fact.

In comparing it to a man being pulled away by the ocean he declares,

We do not endow a mere idea with existence, just as I do not do so in asserting: ‘this is an ocean,’ when I am being carried away by its waves. The ineffable is there before we form an idea of it. To the spirit of man

⁷¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: The Noonday Press Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), p. 109.

⁷² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man is Not Alone* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), p. 61.

⁷³ This is the main theme of Heschel's *The Sabbath*.

⁷⁴ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967), p. 119.

his own spirit is a reliable witness that the mystery is not an absurdity, that on the contrary, things known and perceptible are charged with its heart-stripping, galvanizing meaning.⁷⁵

Heschel understood that man could not choose to ignore the source of meaning and stay sane, whether he affirmed it consciously or not. “By our very existence we are in dire need of meaning, and anything that calls for meaning is always an allusion to Him [God].”⁷⁶

In taking this idea to its logical conclusion, Heschel then stated:

Our assumption that there is meaning in things which has the quality of inspiring the human mind with awe implies a principle that may come as a surprise to many readers; namely, that meaning is something which occurs *outside the mind*... Meaning is not man’s gift to reality... Only those who have lost their sense of meaning would claim that self-expression rather than world-expression is the purpose of living.⁷⁷

Later he continues:

...the reality of the ineffable meaning is, as we have shown, beyond dispute. The imperative of awe is its certificate of evidence, a universal certificate which we all witness and seal with tremor and spasm, *not* because we desire to, but because we cannot brave it... The indication of what transcends all things is given to us with the same immediacy as the things themselves... While our minds are upon all things, our souls are carried away beyond them... Those to whom awareness of the ineffable is a constant state of mind know that the mystery is not an exception but an air that lies about all being, a spiritual setting of reality; not something apart but a *dimension* of all existence. They learn to sense that all existence is embraced by a *spiritual presence*... There is a holiness that hovers over all things, that makes them look to us in some moments like objects of transcendent meditation, as if *to be meant to be thought of* by God... To the religious man it is as if things stood with *their back to him, their faces turned to God*, as if the ineffable quality of things consisted in their being an object of divine thought... It is as if the human mind were not alone

⁷⁵ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man is Not Alone* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), p. 27.

⁷⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), p. 330.

⁷⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man is Not Alone* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), pp. 27–29.

in thinking it, but the whole universe were full of it. We do not wonder *at* things anymore; we wonder *with* all things. We do not think about things; we think for all things.⁷⁸

The most crucial aspect of man's search for a contented life is his need for meaning.⁷⁹ Religion is meant to be an answer to our perception of that which lends ultimate meaning. The feeling of wonder evoking that perception is not irrelevant to man. Unanswered, it means anxiety. Its importance is in the question it arouses: what to do with the ultimate wonder? To live simply in wonder is to live in constant tension.

Thus, the goal of the religious man is to live compatibly with the experience of wonder; his wonder leads to an apprehension that there is something he is needed for, a need to be needed. "Yet that unquenchable need is often miscarried into self-aggrandizement or a desire to find a guarantee for personal immortality. Judaism shows it to be a need to *be needed by God*."

Heschel further avers that the desire is not born in us but is a reaction to God's need for man. "Our need of Him is but an echo of His need of us."⁸⁰ In other words, man's connection to God is not something he discovers; his capacity for responsiveness to God is his ability to recover what is latent in him, by dint of his being human. As Heschel puts it, "What gives birth to religion is not intellectual curiosity, but the fact and experience of our being asked... Faith is not the product of search and endeavor, but the answer to a challenge which no one can forever ignore."⁸¹

There is an extensive correlation between the Biblical understanding of God and the one we encounter through depth theology. Briefly, the God in search of man that Heschel sees in the Bible is the same God

⁷⁸ Ibid., composite from pp. 63–65.

⁷⁹ On this point Shai Held notes that although it may seem here that Heschel falls into the trap (which he himself warned against) of converting God into another answer to man's needs, Heschel's conception of meaning invalidates that claim. To Heschel, the fundamental questions of man, from which meaning is born, is not in fact a question of man but a question *asked of man*. Thus, even man's search for meaning is a search for self-transcendence; or as Held puts it, "the question human beings ask is, at its core, not so much a human question as it is a human readiness to respond to a question posed by God." Shai Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013), p. 87.

⁸⁰ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man is Not Alone* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), pp. 247–248.

⁸¹ Ibid. p. 76.

whose call man intuitively. To an extent, our knowledge of the ineffable conjured by our experiences is akin to the revelation of God's concern to the prophets; in other words, wonder is the experience which prepares man to accept revelation—whether it come from prophecy or tradition. It is important to mention that our experiences alone, according to Heschel, could not guide us from “awe to action”:

The God whose presence in the world we sense is anonymous, mysterious. We may sense that He is, not what He is. What is His name, His will, His hope for me? How should I serve Him, how should I worship Him? The sense of wonder, awe, and mystery is necessary, but not sufficient to find the way from wonder to worship, from willingness to realization, from awe to action.⁸²

“Private insights and inspirations,” Heschel writes, “prepare us to accept what the prophets convey.”⁸³

Heschel's focus on ideas like depth theology is what allowed him to inspire authentic yearning for a religious lifestyle. It is a lesson which Orthodoxy must take to heart if they want to be effective in religious education. The teaching of religion must begin by evoking in people the questions that make it a relevant answer.

Importance of Halakhah

Lastly, emphasis should be placed on the importance of *halakhah* in Heschel's thought. In Heschel's theology, the idea of *halakhah* plays a vital role as moments in which man and God meet. Irrespective of the goal of any specific commandment,⁸⁴ the act as dedicated to the will of God is a moment in which man crystalizes the presence of God into the form of deeds:

⁸² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: The Noonday Press Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), p. 108.

⁸³ Ibid. p. 164.

⁸⁴ There are, however, times when Heschel points to the paradigmatic nature of the commandments, for example in *God in Search of Man* when he states, “The prophets tried to extend the horizon of our conscience and to impart to us a sense of the divine partnership in our dealings with good and evil and in our wrestling with life's enigmas. They tried to teach us how to think in categories of God: His holiness, justice and compassion. The appropriation of these categories, far from exempting us from the obligation to gain new insights in our own time, is a challenge to look for ways of translating Biblical commandments into programs required by our own conditions.” Ibid. p. 273.

... here and now, in this world, the glory [of God] is concealed. It becomes revealed in a sacred deed, in a sacred moment, in a sacrificial deed. No one is lonely when doing a mitzvah, for a mitzvah is where God and man meet.

We do not meet Him in the way in which we meet things of space. To meet Him means to come upon an inner certainty of His realness, upon an awareness of His will. Such meeting, such presence, we experience in deeds.⁸⁵

This is yet another aspect upon which Heschel differs radically from those like Martin Buber who claimed that religious observance suppresses authentic religiosity. To Heschel, ideally, “all worship and ritual are essentially attempts to remove our callousness to the mystery of our own existence and pursuits,” in other words, “Jewish observance is a constant reminder, an intense appeal, to be attentive to Him who is beyond nature, even while we are engaged in dealing with nature.”⁸⁶ But *halakhab* can only play its full role when authentic, resisting man’s tendency to turn the significant into routine and to allow “observance to deteriorate into mere habit.”⁸⁷ To remain genuine in his observance man must retain the questions which instill *halakhab* with meaning, as Heschel writes:

Halacha is an *answer* to a question, namely: What does God ask of me? The moment that question dies in the heart, the answer becomes meaningless. That question, however, is *agadic*, spontaneous, personal... The task of religious teaching is to be a midwife and bring about the birth of the question. Many religious teachers are guilty of ignoring the vital role of the question and condoning spiritual sterility. But the soul is never calm. Every human being is pregnant with problems in a preconceptual form. Most of us do not know how to phrase our quest for meaning, our concern for the ultimate. Without guidance, our concern for the ultimate is not thought through and what we express is premature and penultimate, a miscarriage of the spirit...

It would be a fatal error to isolate the law, to disconnect it from the perplexities, cravings, and aspirations of the soul, from spontaneity and the totality of the person. In the spiritual crisis of the modern Jew the problem of faith takes precedence over the problem of law.

⁸⁵ Ibid. p. 312.

⁸⁶ Ibid. p. 63.

⁸⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *A Passion for Truth* (Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1995), p. 168.

Without faith, inwardness and the power of appreciation, the law is meaningless.⁸⁸

Heschel suggested that there is no *aggada* without *halakhab*. But he also reminded, possibly of greater importance, that there is no *halakhab* without *aggada*. Without *aggada* animating our daily observance of *halakhab* it will become rote. Without a discussion about God corresponding to our discussion of *halakhab* we lose *halakhab*.

Conclusion

Among the many beautiful expressions of Jewish thought in Heschel's writings, there is one in which Heschel portrays the essence of Judaism as "polarity," touching upon the core of his theology and giving a fitting end to the points addressed in this essay:

Jewish living can only be adequately understood in terms of a... polarity which lies at the very heart of Judaism, the polarity of ideas and events, of *mitzva* and sin, of *kavanah* and deed, of regularity and spontaneity, of uniformity and individuality, of *halacha* and *agada*, of law and inwardness, of love and fear, of understanding and obedience, of joy and discipline, of the good and the evil drive, of time and eternity, of this world and the world to come, of revelation and response, of insight and information, of empathy and self-expression, of creed and faith, of the word and that which is beyond words, of man's quest for God and God in search of man.⁸⁹

Again, this essay is by no means a complete exposition of Heschel's ideas. It is only a brief preface to his work with the hope of arousing interest. It is important, though, to realize that Heschel's goal was not just to create an alternative to Western thinking. Through his piety and insights into depth theology, he was also trying to move his readers to a level of spiritual sensitivity. As Held observes, in Heschel's writing "theology and spirituality are always interwoven; to attempt to separate them is, inevitably, to flatten and falsify his thought."⁹⁰ Heschel's account of the enduring impact of the Baal Shem Tov, possibly his greatest inspiration, told in his final book finished mere weeks before his death, draws clear parallels to Heschel's own legacy:

⁸⁸ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: The Noonday Press Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), p. 339.

⁸⁹ Ibid. p. 341.

⁹⁰ Shai Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013), p. 3.

The Jewish people is not the same since the days of the Besht [Baal Shem Tov]. It is a new people. Other personalities contributed great works; they left behind impressive achievements; the Besht left behind a new people. To many Jews the mere fulfilment of regulations was the essence of Jewish living... The Besht taught that Jewish life is an occasion for exaltation. Observance of the Law is the basis, but exaltation through observance is the goal... Other great teachers bore the message of God, sang His praises, lectured about His attributes and wondrous deeds. The Baal Shem brought not only the message; he brought God Himself to the people. His contribution, therefore, consisted of more than illumination, insights, and ideas; he helped mold into being new types of personality: the Hasid and the Tzaddik... [T]he greatness of the Besht was that he was the beginning of a long series of... moments of inspiration. And he holds us under his spell to this very day. He who really wants to be uplifted by communing with a great person whom he can love without reservation, who can enrich his thought and imagination without end, that person can meditate about the life... of the Besht. There has been no one like him during the last thousand years.⁹¹

Heschel's is a voice sorely needed in today's religious communities. His unique perception of those characteristics which present religious life as one full of meaning is of vital significance. There is much to be gained from an honest approach to Heschel's work. The insights of such an exceptionally important Jewish thinker should not be discarded. ❧

⁹¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel as quoted in Samuel H. Dresner, *Heschel, Hasidism, and Halakha* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), p. 41.