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# The Theology of Abraham Joshua Heschel

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Judaism is not a doctrine but a life—the continuation of the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Or so Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972) often said. To learn Jewish theology, then, is to relive the history of God’s encounter with the Jewish people, for theology and history are inseparable. What God revealed to Israel through the prophets, the sages, and the mystics is the “bold and dangerously paradoxical idea” that God needs man.

Much of academic Jewish scholarship finds conflicts between biblical Judaism and the rabbinic Judaism of late antiquity as well as between rabbinic Judaism and later kabbalistic-hasidic teaching. The academic consensus sets up dichotomies between the legal and the spiritual and between the rational and the mystical. Heschel instead integrates biblical, rabbinic, and kabbalistic sources into a unified vision of God’s continuing dialogue with the people of Israel. Indeed, Heschel’s scholarship, rightly understood, is inseparable from his theology, for his scholarship seeks to re-create the dialogue of the Jewish people with God.

While much of this was obvious to readers of Heschel’s account of the classic rabbinical material in his three-volume Hebrew treatise *Torah Min HaShamayim BeAsplaqariah Shel HaDorot*, it only now becomes available to English readers through the translation and

abridgment titled *Heavenly Torah as Refracted Through the Generations*. This presents an opportunity to reflect on the role of this treatise within Heschel’s oeuvre and its place in Heschel’s approach to theology.

Heschel’s oeuvre traces the continuum of Jewish religious consciousness from the biblical and rabbinic periods through the kabbalistic and hasidic ones. Despite their differences, Heschel argued that the teachings of all these periods are unified by the theme of God’s concern for humanity. The different expressions of Judaism are not mutually exclusive but, rather, moments in the dialectic of man’s encounter with God. Where others saw dichotomies, Heschel saw polarities. Our inclination to understand Judaism or to approach the divine through only one of the poles leaves us, according to Heschel, with partial understandings of Judaism and fragmentary visions of the divine. In contrast, Heschel’s theology offers a historical as well as conceptual framework for maintaining the dialectic without reducing one pole to the other.

In this regard, *Torah Min HaShamayim BeAsplaqariah Shel HaDorot* qualifies as Heschel’s magnum opus. It guides the reader through the woof and warp of the classic texts—*Man Is Not Alone* and *God in Search of Man*—that inform his writings on contemporary theology. These books that made Heschel such an insightful writer for the Jewish—and, to a great extent, for the Christian—audience restate his historical-theological vision of Judaism. He presented this vision first in *The Prophets* and subsequently and more extensively in *Torah Min HaShamayim*. This vision, which involves tracing the thread of God’s interest in

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man throughout the fabric of Judaism, is reflected throughout his writing.

So much of Heschel's work is of one cloth. *Man Is Not Alone* is subtitled *A Philosophy of Religion* while *God in Search of Man* is subtitled *A Philosophy of Judaism*. For Heschel, man is not alone because God is in search of man. By virtually beginning *God in Search of Man* with the statement "Religion is an answer to man's ultimate questions," Heschel underscores his thesis that the philosophy of Judaism is an answer to problems in the philosophy of religion—indeed, its ultimate problems. Not only do these two works on contemporary theology fit together, they also converge with his two major works of historical scholarship in his statement that the idea of pathos in *The Prophets* "is an explication of the idea of God in search of man."

Chronologically, *The Prophets*, based on his German dissertation of the early 1930s, came first, albeit published in its English form only in the early 1960s. It was followed in the 1950s by his two classic texts on theology. In the early 1960s, the first two volumes of *Torah Min HaShamayim* were published. Nonetheless, it is clear that his major scholarship was conceptually first. For Heschel, scholarship and theology are one.

Much of Heschel's work seeks to free Jewish theology from the constraints of Maimonides' philosophical concept of an absolutely transcendent God who is independent of humanity. To this, Heschel counterposes the concept of divine pathos—that is, of a God who searches for man, who, indeed, is in need of man. It emphasizes the interdependency of the divine and the human.

To underscore the continuity of this understanding from biblical to rabbinic to kabbalistic thinking, Heschel states:

In the phrase *we need each other* is embedded in the concept of Israel's power to diminish or enhance God's might. This opinion, which served as a cornerstone of kabbalistic teaching, is already alluded to in a homily in *Sifre* (319): "You neglected the Rock that begot you" (Deut. 32:18). The word *teshi* ("neglected") can be understood in relation to the word *teshishbut* ("feebleness"), whence the interpretation "You weaken the power of the One above. . . ." This approach achieved its classic formulation in the mouth of R. Judah b. Simon, an amora of the third to fourth generation of Eretz Israel: "As long as the righteous comply with the Divine will they augment the Power above, as it says 'And now, I pray Thee, let the strength of the Lord be enhanced' (Num. 14:17). But if not, then, as it were, 'You enfeebled the Rock that begot you' (Deut. 32:18)." Similarly: "As long as Israel complies with the Divine will they augment the Power

above, as it says: 'In God we shall make [create] power' (Ps. 60:14); and if not, as it were, say, "and they [i.e., Israel] are gone without strength before the pursuer" (Lam. 1:6). According to the Zohar (2:33a), this idea is intimated in the verse "Give power to God" (Ps. 68:35).

Both the ancient rabbis and the medieval kabbalists, contends Heschel, held that human compliance with the divine will augments divine power. One might think of the divine-human relationship as analogous to that of a general and soldier where the power lies with the general and the soldier merely follows orders. In reality, every command implemented by the soldier extends the general's power. The growth of the power of the general thus corresponds to the increase in compliance by the soldier, and vice versa. An order that commands no compliance is a voice in the wilderness.

Judaism is so commandment-oriented precisely because God's kingship is realized on earth through the fulfillment of the commandments. In fact, according to the Midrash, God gave Israel so many commandments because Israel had made God king first. Even more striking is the rabbinical concept that it is human witness that makes God real. Heschel often cites the midrashic gloss to Isaiah 43:12, "So you are My witnesses—declares the Lord—and I am God," to wit: "When you are my witnesses, then I am God, but when you are not my witnesses, then I am, as it were, not God."

The concept of divine-human partnership, according to Heschel, weaves the thinking of the prophets, the rabbis, and the medieval kabbalists into the whole cloth of Israel's historical relationship with God. This distinguishes his scholarship categorically from that of many of his contemporaries. Unlike Gershom Scholem and Martin Buber, who saw in Kabbalah a gnostic phenomenon that deviated from the biblical and rabbinic traditions, Heschel saw in this body of medieval mysticism a reformulation of the rabbis' concept of God's dependence on man.

In the transcript of a talk entitled "Jewish Theology," Heschel summarized his reading of the Jewish sources: "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 and of Chazal [the rabbinic sages of talmudic literature], and it is understandable in our own time. . . . In the light of this idea, of God being in need of man, you have to entirely revise all the clichés that are used in religious language." Heschel then referred to his work *Torah Min HaShamayim*, saying:

In volume I there is an entire section dealing with the *Torat Hashkekinah*. Without the principle of

God in search of man, the whole idea of *shekinah* is not intelligible. . . . It permeates rabbinic literature and post-rabbinic thought in Judaism, and it is missing in our discussion and in Maimonides's list of dogmas. Actually the idea of *pathos*, which I consider to be the central idea in prophetic theology, contains the doctrine of the *shekinah*. . . . Without an understanding of the idea of *shekinah* we fail completely to understand the field of Jewish theology or the theme of God in search of man which I consider to be the summary of Jewish theology.

God's indwelling on earth is the fulcrum of Heschel's theology. Man's capacity to approach God arises from God's indwelling in his people Israel, in the form of a divine presence that Israel re-creates through the performance of the *mitzvot*.

In the same lecture, Heschel protested that the concept of *shekinah* becomes "so terribly Hellenized" in the hands of scholars who fail to see its foundation in divine pathos. The "Hellenized," or rationalist, prejudice of mainstream academics tends to deprecate the medieval Jewish mysticism characterized by the term *Kabbalah*. In doing so, scholars betray a radically different reading of rabbinical Judaism and the Bible itself. The Jewish mystics, Heschel wrote,

are inspired by a bold and dangerously paradoxical idea that not only is God necessary to man but man is also necessary to God, to the unfolding of his plans in this world. Thoughts of this kind are indicated and even expressed in various rabbinic sources. . . . In the Zohar this idea is formulated in a more specific way. . . . The Holy One, as it were, said: "When Israel is found to be worthy below, my power prevails in the universe; but when Israel is found to be unworthy, she weakens my power above, and the power of severe judgment predominates in the world."

The mystics, Heschel emphasizes, stated the biblical-rabbinic implication of divine pathos in an even more specific way. Nothing could be further from the prevailing view in academic Jewish scholarship, beginning with the great researcher and founder of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Solomon Schechter (1847–1915). Schechter treats *Kabbalah* as a body of work alien to the rabbinical Judaism of the Talmud, even though occasional insights in his own writings show that he sometimes saw a connection. He writes, for example:

He (God) needs us even as we need him" was a favorite axiom with certain mystics. In the language of the rabbis we should express the same sentiment thus, "One God through Israel, and one Israel through God. They are his selected people, and he is their selected portion.

This is exactly Heschel's point of emphasis. Schechter, despite being a careful student of *Kabbalah*, could not see with Heschel's degree of clarity that kabbalistic theology is a flowering of a branch of rabbinic theology.

The *midrashim* cited by Heschel above also appear juxtaposed in Ephraim Urbach's classic monograph *The Sages*. Urbach, who until his death in 1991 was Israel's preeminent scholar of classical Jewish sources, cites many of the same texts that undergird Heschel's reading, but from a very different standpoint. With regard to the comment in Sifrei Deuteronomy quoted above by Heschel, Urbach writes, rather apologetically:

This dictum is directed against oversimplified faith. The non-manifestation of God's power is not indicative of the absence of that power, and one must not come to God with the complaint "where is Thy power?" but there is a nexus between the revelation of this power and the actions of human beings.

Elsewhere, Urbach writes in a manner reminiscent of Heschel without, however, the linkage to *Kabbalah*:

Evil deeds and transgressions can banish the *shekinah*, as it were, from the world. In the view of the Sages, the ethical and religious conduct of man determines both the manifestation of God's presence in this world and the revelation of his power and might.

Perceiving a chasm between rabbinic and kabbalistic thought, neither Schechter nor Urbach could see what for Heschel was obvious, namely, that with regard to the divine-human relationship *Kabbalah* represents a "more specific" statement of the rabbinic perspective.

Heschel's work on rabbinic thought continues his work on biblical thought—what Heschel called "God's anthropology." Both focus on the category of pathos in the divine-human relationship and on how revelation involves the interaction of the divine and human. Although Heschel's biblical commentary is concerned with the prophetic understanding of the divine, and his rabbinic scholarship deals with the rabbinic understanding of Torah and *shekinah*, the two presentations overlap. In a sense, *Heavenly Torah* serves as the sequel to *The Prophets*. The latter and the first two volumes of the original Hebrew edition of *Heavenly Torah* were published in 1962. *The Prophets* concludes with a chapter entitled "The Dialectic of the Divine-Human Encounter." The third volume of *Heavenly Torah* opens with the chapter "It Is Not in the Heavens"; its opening subsections are "Without

Sages There Is No Torah,” and “The Sages Are the Finishing and the Completion to the Torah.” This last volume of *Heavenly Torah*, in short, begins just where *The Prophets* ends, identifying the sages as the successors of the prophets. This supports Heschel’s overarching thesis that, as prophecy emerges from the encounter between prophet and God, so rabbinic Judaism emerges from the encounter between sage and Torah.

*Heavenly Torah* differs from mainstream academic approaches in its content as well as its mode of presentation. Where the academics seek to summarize rabbinic thinking, Heschel draws the reader inside it, exegizing it from within, as it were. Not only does Heschel condense the crucial debates over immanence and transcendence into sharp juxtapositions; he composes his treatise in rabbinic Hebrew and employs religious categories native to it. The subsections of the treatise frequently are titled with rabbinic quotations. Unlike the academics, who stand outside rabbinic thinking to comment on it, Heschel’s exegesis remains in dialogue with the sages of late antiquity. *Heavenly Torah* is not a commentary on the rabbinic sources but rather an extension of them. Just as theology and scholarship are cut of one cloth, the language and thought of the classical Jewish sources are inseparably united. He organizes his presentation according to rabbinic categories so that the language and structure of the book enable the reader to engage the minds of the sages.

A result of Heschel’s daring procedure is the discovery that the Jewish sages rarely were of one mind. On the contrary, on most theological issues there are at least two resolutions, frequently at odds with each other.

Heschel portrays this characteristic opposition of two schools of thought under the rubrics of Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael. These often are used historically, but, at other times, Heschel employs them typologically. The heaven-bound school of Akiva, with its emphasis on the *shekinah*, stands in contrast to the more mundane school of Ishmael. The Akivan perspective was mystical, possibly eschatological, unbounded, and often paradoxical. The Ishmaelite perspective was more critical, rationalistic, restrained, and pellucid. Together, according to Heschel, they form a dialectic, not just a dyad, in which plays out the human encounter with the divine.

A case in point is Akiva’s focus on the biblical instances of God’s immanence and Ishmael’s focus on those of God’s transcendence. The point is not *either-or*, but *both-and*; as Heschel says, “the dichotomy of transcendence and immanence is an oversimplification,” for “God remains transcendent in his immanence, and related in his transcendence.”

By contrasting the sides of an issue under the

rubrics of Rabbi Ishmael or Rabbi Akiva, the reader works through a debate rather than a doctrine. Sometimes whole chapters are in dialectical relationship. For instance, chapter 2 of volume 2, “Moses’ Ascent to Heaven,” contains the subsections “Rabbi Akiva’s View: Moses Was in Heaven,” “Moses Ascended to Heaven,” “Moses Did Not Ascend to Heaven,” and “How Could a Person Ascend to Heaven?” On a more mundane level, chapter 5 of volume 3 contains a subsection called “Against Those Who Are Stringent,” whereas chapter 6 begins with “Beloved Are Prohibitions.”

Heschel’s perspective is expressed in the terminology of polarity. Fritz Rothschild, in his introduction to a collection of Heschel’s writings titled *Between God and Man*, called such terms “scissors words,” since they only cut together, like a pair of scissors, and not singly, like a knife. Although Heschel’s pedagogy speaks of “a covenant between opposites” or a “melding of opposites,” he is nonetheless quite cognizant of the impossibility of holding both ends of a stretched rope. For Heschel, “there is always a polarity of two principles.” Neither the practical, this-worldly pole represented by the school of Ishmael nor the mystical sense of God’s need for man represented by the school of Akiva can be reduced to the other. Nor can they be fully integrated. It is the limitation of human vision that causes us to see God and the world in two different ways at different times.

The goal of Heschel’s presentation is not to summarize Jewish theology but rather to re-create the experience of God’s encounter with the Jewish people by reliving the debates of the sages. Heschel’s theology ultimately is Akivan, responding to a God who searches for man because he is in need of man. But this God may be approached only through an encounter in which man considers his dependence on the absolutely transcendent God propounded by Ishmael. Each pole needs the other to correct itself. Only together do they embrace the full reality of the encounter with the divine—a gate to God that always swings on two hinges.

The third volume of *Heavenly Torah* is subtitled, and chapter 36 titled, “Both These and Those Are the Words of the Living God.” Sometimes a different perspective—indeed, a competing one—can supplement one’s understanding of the truth. Since the fullness of the divine word cannot be contained in a single human perspective, a plurality of understandings is needed to fill out the human grasp of divine truth. The whole truth remains elusively human, exclusively divine. Accordingly, the rabbis designated truth as God’s signature—that is, a unique characteristic of divine cognition that exceeds the human grasp. In fact, since any

human perspective is necessarily limited to part of the truth, the whole truth may not be humanly accessible without contradiction.

This underlying insight allowed Heschel to understand the Jewish classics from the inside, in contradistinction to the conventional assertions of modern scholarship. It also explains his generosity toward alternative theological viewpoints. It was not so much that the various scholars were wrong in their analysis of biblical, rabbinic, kabbalistic, or hasidic theology as that they saw only part of the picture. Rather than faulting them for partial vision, Heschel sought to correct their understanding by providing the missing parts of the picture.

Heschel's concept of theology as participation in the unfolding of revelation has an inherent affinity for collaborative pluralism—which contributed to his openness to Jewish–Christian dialogue. For a pluralism to be collaborative, however, the convergence of ends must exceed the divergence of means. Heschel's pluralism is firmly bounded by the classical Jewish texts: He understands tradition itself to be an aspect of God's encounter with the people of Israel. His pluralism reflects his understanding of both the dialectic of the tradition and the divine–human relationship. Heschel asks us to relive the revelation recorded in the history of Jewish theologizing, which epitomizes God's conversation with humanity. □

## Advent Carol

Hush that anguished hymn you're humming:  
 "Come, O Come, Emmanuel."  
 Trumpet Christmas! Fix his coming  
 firmly at "The First Nowell."

He's *already* come in glory!  
 Why plead, "Savior, come at last"?  
 Let's talk Christmas! Tell a story  
 safely in the distant past.

Drown out John the Baptist. Edit  
 out "Prepare! Make straight the way!"  
 Cut to Christmas! Buy on credit.  
 Square things up another day.

Advent's dreary. Let's start living  
 Christmas *now*! Wear red and green!  
 While we're at it, skip Thanksgiving!  
 Deck the halls at Halloween!

Then, when the Incarnate Verb  
 overnight becomes passé,  
 carry Christmas to the curb.  
 Pack the Prince of Peace away.

—Julie Stoner