

# The Inexplicable Phenomenon

Reuven Kimelman

**Abraham Joshua Heschel, Prophetic Witness**, by Edward K. Kaplan and Samuel H. Dresner. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

This review should start with a confession. About a decade ago, I was asked by Samuel Dresner to collaborate with him on a work of the life and thought of our revered teacher, Abraham Joshua Heschel. I assumed that Dresner had approached me because of my involvement with Heschel throughout the 1960s as student, teaching assistant, and social activist. Indeed, I had penned the first eulogy, which appeared within 30 days of his death in the magazine *Response* and subsequently in *The Melton Journal*. We conducted some initial interviews in Boston with Isadore Twersky and Nahum Glatzer. In the course of these activities, I came to understand the magnitude of the undertaking and the realization that, in the light of my other commitments, I would not be up to the task, and sorrowfully bowed out. After reading this work by Kaplan and Dresner, I am overjoyed at having declined the offer.

The book is a *tour de force*; it recovers and reconstructs so much of the life of Heschel that it results in a veritable intellectual biography. From chapter to chapter, the process of the jelling of Heschel's thought becomes visible. It is clear that the great American Jewish theologian of the 1950s and 1960s was already such in embryo in the 1930s of Germany. The book demonstrates the absence of any consequential change from the early to the late Heschel. The themes that characterized his later works are already pronounced in his early writings. When the almost 30-year-old Heschel moved to Frankfurt in 1937 because of Buber, he was intellectually already the mature theologian of later fame. Indeed,

most of his characteristic themes achieved their essential formulation prior to his 25th birthday.

The fascinating chapter on Heschel's participation in David Koigen's philosophical community documents that, by 1930, when Heschel was only 23, the major building blocks were in place, but the range of competency that flabbergasted his colleagues years later was already evident. By the age of 30 he could have qualified for an academic position in Bible, Rabbinics, medieval thought, mysticism, or modern Jewish thought. His dissertation and first book on the prophets demonstrated a mastery of the Bible along with wide reading in psychology, literature, and philosophy, with a strong emphasis on phenomenology. By then, he had already served as assistant to Hanock Albeck, the Talmud Professor at the Hochschule, and penned books on Abaranel and Maimonides in addition to monographs on technical issues on medieval and modern Jewish philosophy. Who else could have been known as Albeck's and Buber's assistant? As far as that goes, who else could have written philosophical and literary Yiddish, German, Hebrew, and English as if each one were his native tongue?

The beauty of the book lies in its uncanny way of interpolating citations from Heschel's works to explain events in his life. Heschel was fond of observing that books are windows to the souls of their authors. No better statement could reflect the methodological brilliance of the work under review. The book also uses Heschel's poetry as integral to his life and thought. Heschel is fortunate to have merited such sensitive interpretations of his poetry.

This book also allows us to understand how one individual had the audacity and the wherewithal to seek to rewrite Jewish intellectual history by contributing a new understanding to every major age of Jewish thought. His dissertation and subsequent book, *The Prophets*, with its understanding of divine Pathos,

sought to revise our understanding of the prophetic relationship with God. His book, *Torah Min Ha-Shamayim...* contended that there were two internally coherent schools of classical Rabbinic thought that reflected not only the polarity of such thought but also that of much of subsequent Jewish thinking. His intellectual biography and monograph of Maimonides not only revolutionized our understanding of the inner life of this most consequential medieval Jew but also changed our understanding of the relationship of rationalism and mysticism. Similarly, his contributions to the life of the early Chasidic masters, collected together as *The Circle of Baal Shem Tov*, and that of the Baal Shem Tov and the Kotzker Rebbe, *A Passion for Truth*, have become landmarks in their own right. And, finally, how much poorer would modern Jewish thought be without the twin understandings, to use the titles of his books, that *Man Is Not Alone* and that *God Is in Search of Man*? Had he only done one of these, his life and thought would have deserved a book — all the more so for all of this and more.

The book also explains why, of all the great theologians of the 20th century, Heschel is most cited in scholarly bibliographies. This is not to detract from the contributions of Cohen, Rosenzweig, Kook, Kaplan, Soloveitchik, et al., but none of these men combined the qualities of the academic study of Judaism with creative theologizing as well as did Heschel.

The only comparable phenomenon is that of Buber. From the perspective of the overall history of religion, Buber far exceeded Heschel's contribution. But from the perspective of the study of Judaism, Buber's contribution is limited basically to Biblical and Chasidic studies. Kaplan, who may have been the most astute observer of Judaism in modernity, made little contribution to any academic understanding of pre-modern Judaism. Cohen's achievement was extraordinary in his day but Jewishly of limited range. It is not really fair to compare Rosenzweig, as he died in his early 40s. Nonetheless, his academic achievements at a comparable age were not of Heschelian proportions. Kook and Soloveitchik, on the other hand, lived to ripe old ages. Neither, however, were academics of Judaism in the university sense. Their impact, of course, is undeniable, for they provided both the skeleton and the ligaments of modern Orthodox thought with regard to its confrontation with modernity in

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general and with Zionism in particular. Both outlined an integrated vision of Orthodoxy and modernity. Neither, however, is cited often in footnotes of academics on the study of Judaism outside of studies on their thought. This only underscores how Heschel was able to integrate what others held as disparate and fundamentally unintegratable.

The ability to combine what others saw as separate explains how Heschel could function as a rebbe as well as an academic. The only other person I knew who integrated these polarities so well was Professor Isadore Twersky of Harvard University. Both were professors and rebbes, both were descendants of

the circle of the Ball Shem Tov, and both took their cue from Maimonides. Heschel inaugurated his academic career with a study of Maimonides and concluded it with one on the Kotzker Rebbe. Twersky's first works were on Maimonides and Ravad, whereas his last years focused on the Chasam Sofer. Coincidentally, Professor Twersky mentioned to me that Professor Heschel had contacted him with regard to a difficult "Rambam" a week before his *histalkus*, as Chasidim would say. It was Maimonides who, while spending most of his life on intellectual perfection, in the end dedicated himself to the needs of humanity, believing that the ultimate service of God is in the ser-

vice of His image. In their later years, both of these professor/rebbs sacrificed many scholarly projects on the altar of communal service for the sake of *tikun olam*.

For many, Heschel was an enigma wrapped up in a conundrum. What others saw as either/or, he saw as both/and. For those who have a low threshold for ambiguity, one may be a rebbe or a professor; a pietistic *talmid chacham* or an academic scholar, but not both. One-dimensional people love to have bed-fellows in their own Procrustean beds. It is the achievement of this book to have let us understand the otherwise almost inexplicable phenomenon known as Abraham Joshua Heschel. •

## History, Hatred, and Deceit

John C. Landau

**A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**, by Mark Tessler. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994, 928 pp., \$59.95, hardcover; \$27.50, paper.

Why review a book in 1999 published in 1994? Because an aggressive marketing campaign aimed at college faculty may help to make Mark Tessler's *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* the standard American college textbook on the Arab-Israeli dispute. Not that Tessler's history lacks for other qualities that may give it authoritative status as well. The text is 761 pages long, nearly 100 pages of notes follow, the bibliography has about 750 English and Arabic-language entries (no Hebrew language sources, as far as I can determine, are listed), and there is a generous index.

Still, *A History* does not confine itself to conflict between Israelis and Palestinians but takes in the Arab-Israeli dispute in its entirety, from its earliest inception in the late 19th century to the current "peace process." It has a

monumental quality, even epic sweep, and is rich in narrative detail. Written in clear, dignified language, it will present no difficulties for non-specialist readers. And its attractive paperback binding will bring it within the price range of college undergraduates.

Also in *A History's* favor is its generally restrained and cautious-sounding tone, and the author's candid-seeming admission that not all the facts about the Arab-Israeli dispute have been established with certainty. Along the same lines are Tessler's occasional acknowledgments that scholars and historians disagree in their assessments of the motives and intentions of both sides. To the reader with little previous background, Tessler may seem to be an author with no axe to grind.

But this appearance of objectivity is deceptive. Many of the documentary sources quoted or cited by Tessler are Arab or pro-Arab politicians or activists with no pretensions to impartiality. Other, more reliable sources are cited very selectively, and sometimes their contents are misrepresented. Tessler's reporting of facts and events in the Arab-Israeli conflict is equally one-sided and selective. His choice of language tends to be biased. While the author often

covers himself by presenting Arab allegations against Israel as Arab perceptions rather than as established facts, he will then proceed to insinuate that the allegations are true, or probably true, or at any rate what Arabs sincerely believe — which, he suggests, is the moral equivalent of truth.

Space permits me here only to provide a few examples of such distorted historiography. In his account of the events leading up to the outbreak of the Six-Day War of 1967, Tessler portrays Israel as having provoked the conflict through a mixture of threats and harsh reprisal raids. While the author characterizes Israeli reprisal actions against Palestinian terrorists with such expressions as "major attack," "large-scale military operation," and even "invasion," he describes Palestinian terrorist attacks on Israel as "a minor irritant" and as "incidents." The word "terrorism" is used only in quotation marks. Syrian border attacks on Israelis are described as "exchanges of fire." Syrian allegations of Israeli violations of the 1949 armistice agreement are presented in detail, while Israel's version of its border dispute with Syria goes largely unreported. Israeli warnings to the Syrian regime concerning its attacks and sponsorship of Palestinian terrorism are described as a "campaign of intimidation" against Syria; the numerous Syrian and Egyptian threats against Israel during this period are characterized with milder and vaguer expressions.<sup>1</sup>

Worst of all in this section of his *History* is Tessler's use of a fabricated quotation attributed to Israel's then mili-

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