

Abraham Joshua Heschel at 100: Still the Voice of God Today
Rabbi Joshua Levine Grater, Pasadena Jewish Temple & Center

On the 25th anniversary yartzheit of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, in 1997, I had a life-changing experience. I had just met and befriended Heschel's daughter and only child, Susannah, and she took me with her to all of the various memorial services that were happening around New York City in her father's memory. I was in the Heschel home, meeting his relatives, great rebbes and leaders of various Orthodox sects, who, regardless of the fact that their famous family member left Orthodoxy, came to pay their respects and honor his memory. I remember an intense ma'ariv service, at the Heschel School, one in which Susannah taught a Mishnah, a selection of law, in honor of her father, using the chanting and pronunciation of another world, another time. I was swept back into Eastern Europe, to the village where Heschel came from, to the beit midrash, the study hall, where he emerged as the Talmudic and Biblical genius he was to become. I had never experienced such depth of prayer, such fervor of learning text, such intensity of emotion; Abraham Joshua Heschel's spirit was alive in that room, and continues to live in the hearts and souls of all of those follow his path of Judaism. I am proud to consider myself one of those people.

I am who I am today, in large measure, because of Abraham Joshua Heschel. Without his writings, without meeting Susannah, without studying with the students of his student, without knowing and learning from those who were influenced by him directly, such as my teacher Rabbi Gillman, I would not be the rabbi I am today. My theological outlook on life, namely how I understand God to operate in the world and in my life; how I pray and what prayer means to me, all of these come from Heschel. My dedication to the soul, to examining how we can continuously deepen our connection to holiness and God in our world, that is the legacy of Heschel. My commitment to Shabbat and the power that it holds for us in our modern world; I learned this from Heschel. This week, namely on Thursday, January 11th, we celebrate his 100th birthday, his centennial year, and so it is only fitting that we spend some time talking about the man, his thought, his action and his continued legacy.

Time, which was so important to Heschel, is honoring him in the next few weeks. This week's parsha is Vayehi, the final words of Genesis, which outline the death of the great patriarchs, Jacob and Joseph, is the parsha that Heschel died on in 1972. Next week is Heschel's yartzheit, which is falling during parshat Sh'mot, the beginning of slavery and our fight against Pharaoh, which is also when we celebrate the life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. How appropriate! Heschel spent the end of his life fighting against injustice, screaming out against the Pharaohs of his day, using his prophetic understanding to try and end the Vietnam War, speak out against poverty and of course, famously walking with and befriending Dr. King in his fight against racism and for civil rights. From the life of Jacob, the God-wrestler, to the battle against injustice; from Va'yehi to Sh'mot, these are the mountaintops from which Heschel lived his life. It is from these mountaintops that I try to live my life, combining love of Torah and God with a need for prophetic screaming against the injustices of our world. We once again, sadly, have almost an identical war to protest; we continue to have poverty and racism; we continue to have genocide and occupation; and we continue to need the voices of Rabbi Heschel and Rev. King. With Pharaohs all around us, we continue to need the voice of the prophet Jeremiah, who called on us to cut through the callousness around our hearts, to circumcise that flesh, so that we can

penetrate our inner core, our neshamah sheleimah, and release light into the world. Heschel taught us how to do that again, for our age. We need his voice today, the voice that calls us to think about God in a real and meaningful way; the voice that calls on the leaders of our nation to heed the call of true leadership through justice, humility, compassion and righteousness; the voice that calls us to embrace and love Shabbat, mitzvot and the uniquely Jewish path that the Torah, interpreted for our day, invites us to live. I am constantly seeking these voices in my life; I am constantly trying to become this voice in the world.

Heschel taught me that God, Torah, Judaism and my whole being are fully interconnected. There is no break between any of these moments in our lives. When we pray, we must give our whole selves over to the experience of connecting with God, the Divine. As Heschel said, “One who goes to pray is not intent upon enhancing his storehouse of knowledge; he who performs a ritual does not expect to advance his interests. Sacred deeds are designed to make living compatible with our sense of the ineffable.” (Between God and Man, p. 182) Mitzvot, what I now call our spiritual discipline, can lead us to this kind of life, even as we exist in the secular and material world. We must cultivate an inner sense of connection with the Divine so as to carry it forth in all moments of our lives. This takes work, patience, consistency and inner courage. Heschel embodied all of these traits. Every moment, with every falling leaf, every passing car; with every unseen sound, with every unseen breath; these are the moments of eternity, holy of holies. If we only we can come awake to these moments, then Heschel will live in all of us.

When we stop our day at mincha time, as the sun is beginning to set in the sky and the evening begins to approach, and we give thanks for our lives, our bounty in that moment, we can begin to see the world as Heschel saw it: trees wearing tefillin, wonder in every sunset, mystery in every sunrise, God in each moment of life. Heschel had a consciousness that rarely exists today, at least in the western world. Pathos for God, feeling the pain, sharing the joy, having a relationship – that is what Heschel lived with. This is how I try to live – I try to live with what he says is possible. That is my life’s goal. My rabbinate is grounded in his thought, as is my approach to prayer, much of which I learned during my time at Congregation B’nai Jeshurun in Manhattan, from my teachers, Rabbis Roly Matalon and Marcelo Bronstein, both disciples of Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer z”l, a direct student of Heschel. The prayer experience of BJ, the intensity and focus that we attempted to create each and every Shabbat and chag was pure Heschelian. It is that kind of energy and intensity that I am trying to create here at PJTC, for I know that there is nothing higher, nothing more holy, than community connected in rich and meaningful prayer. It is never a performance, a show for the congregation to watch. It is an experience to partake in and fully contribute to. Without all of us in it together, the experience is not complete. I move, shuckle, sway during prayer so as to help the prayer move through me. I feel God’s spirit in me, usually not through the words, but through the energy that is produced by saying the words. As Heschel once said about prayer, “The act of prayer is more than a process of the mind and a movement of the lips... What marks the act of prayer is the decision to enter and face the presence of God. To pray means to expose oneself to God...” (Man’s Quest for God, pg. 61)

In today’s Jewish experience, we need to recapture the sense of awe and wonder that Heschel professed so often. Prayer must regain its sense of meaning for it to have value for us today. Life must be lived with a sense of the ineffable, which Heschel meant as seeing the great amazement of just being alive. How many of us wake up each morning and give thanks for the new day?

Modeh ani l'fanecha. How many of us see the pain of the world around us and call out for justice? How many of us notice the beauty, the glory, the absolute magnificence that exists right here, right in front of us? Heschel noticed the gnat on a wall, the bud on a tree just before it blooms, the face of the God in the homeless people he passed on the street each day. And, in all of these moments, he understood that there was a God, a Creator and Sustainer, a Life-Supporter and a Guide; we must do the work in this world, that is true, but it is God that offers us the chance to do mitzvot, it is God that smiles when we succeed and it is God that cries when we fail. We all have the ability to become the prophet, to live with the voice of God in us. On this, Heschel said, "The pathos of God is upon him. It moves him. It breaks out in him like a storm in the soul, overwhelming his inner life, his thoughts, feelings, wishes, and hopes. It takes possession of his heart and mind, giving him the courage to act against the world." (Between God and Man, pg. 125) This is the mindset of Heschel and while we can't all live like this all of the time, I believe, ultimately, that this is the mindset that can be achieved through prayer, leading to action in our world, if only we commit ourselves to cultivating this sense. We must carry God with us on our journey in life, not just visit God when we come to the synagogue.

I cannot imagine my life without Heschel, and in honor of his 100th year, I am committing myself to relearning some of his major works, making them the focus of my personal study. I would encourage all of you to do the same. If you have read something by Heschel, either reread it or find something new to read. If you have read nothing by Heschel, start with his incredible work about Shabbat, called *The Sabbath*. It is short and his most accessible book. Perhaps take some time each Shabbat afternoon to read from this book, or any of his other works, most of which are a bit more challenging and somewhat dense, but amazing nonetheless. *God in Search of Man*, *Man is Not Alone*, *A Passion for Truth*, *Man's Quest for God*; all of these books have the potential to change your life if you read them with an open heart, an open mind and desire to be truly moved, shaken, uprooted and replanted with different vision, new motivation and a drive to make this world a more holy, special, just place, and to live a life filled with the awe and wonder that we seldom only see in our children. Heschel maintained his sense of wonder throughout his life, and at the end, he recalled that fact as the most important kernel he had to teach. "Live your life as a work of art," he said in his final interview. What more can be said then, "Amen."

May the birth and life of Rabbi Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel continue to be for a blessing.
Shabbat shalom!