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SPIRITUAL AUDACITY:

The Abraham Joshua Heschel Story

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This Discussion Guide was developed by Dr. Deryl Davis, in consultation with biographer Edward Kaplan, consultant Rabbi Jack Moline and filmmaker Martin Doblmeier.

Discussion Guide

This discussion guide is designed to facilitate deeper conversation and reflection across a variety of settings including classrooms, congregations and small group engagements. Each of the seven chapters begins with an Overview, followed by suggested discussion questions. Each section also has selected video clips from the film's interviewees. Some clips are seen in the film while others are intended to provide additional perspectives and open new lines of discussion. The text for those clips is included for easier reference.

We value your comments on how you are using these materials, what is effective and what is missing. We welcome your input at info@journeyfilms.com.

I. God In Search of Man

Heschel's 1955 book *God in Search of Man*, and the earlier companion volume *Man Is Not Alone* (1951), exemplify a theme that runs throughout much of Heschel's life and work: That God needs human beings as partners in establishing justice and restoring wholeness to the world. This radical understanding of the relationship between human beings and the divine is revealed in the biblical covenant between God and Israel. God chooses to need human beings, and in so doing, God takes a risk on being disappointed, frustrated, and even betrayed by humankind. In

Heschel's thinking, God experiences "divine pathos;" that is, God is emotionally affected by the actions of humankind, for good and for ill. At the same time, human beings can help make God more present in and to the world by their actions on behalf of justice, compassion, love, and mercy---the very qualities God represents. This process of restoration is humankind's sacred duty. It is how human beings fulfill their part of the covenant with the divine. This "partnership" is the true origin of religion and the theological foundation for Heschel's own involvement in movements for civil and human rights, for peacemaking, and in support of the marginalized. God and people must work together to repair the world.

Questions to Consider:

1. Rabbi Shai Held asserts that the sentence "God is in need of man" appears often in Heschel's writing. Does it trouble you to think that God might "need" people, even if God has voluntarily chosen to experience that sort of vulnerability? How does this change the way you think about God (if it does)? How does it change the way you think about your relationship to God?
2. Rabbi James Rudin says that Heschel wants us to accept the surprising idea that "God needs us as much as we need God." Following Heschel, Rudin also asserts that this places a unique responsibility upon individual human beings. If, as Heschel argues, God seeks us out to be "partners" in restoring the world, what sort of responsibility does that place upon us? What does or could it mean to be a "partner" with God? Is that an unfamiliar idea to you?
3. "Divine pathos" is a central part of Heschel's depiction of the relationship between God and human beings. According to Heschel, God is not some remote, indifferent being, but a divine creator deeply concerned with and affected by what God's creatures do. Does it surprise you to think about God being affected by your actions? If you were to accept Heschel's argument, would that impact or influence what you do, or the decisions and actions you take?
4. Heschel insists that God has chosen a kind of self-limitation in order to engage as a partner with humankind, and that we can follow that model by choosing to transcend our own self-interests. In what way is God's concern for and chosen vulnerability towards humankind a model for human beings to follow?
5. Scholar Benjamin Sax applies a contemporary interpretation of the Jewish concept of *Tikkun Olam* to Heschel's theology, particularly in regard to the idea of covenant or partnership between God and humankind. What is *Tikkun Olam*, and how might it relate to Heschel's interpretation of the covenantal partnership between human beings and God? (It should be noted that Heschel himself did not use the term *Tikkun Olam*, or not in terms of its contemporary meaning.)

6. One of the more surprising elements of Heschel's theology may be the idea that human beings have the ability to help God become "complete" or fully manifest in the world. Several scholars reference this in the film. How do you understand this idea? Do you agree with it, or does it border on the sacrilegious? *Can* human beings help God become complete?
7. Theologian Shai Held says that Heschel most often writes "something is asked of us" and this awareness was the beginning of religion. How do you understand this assertion, and how does it relate to Heschel's belief in the fundamental mystery of creation?
8. Heschel attributes the decline of religion in the West in the mid-twentieth century to the loss of a sense of wonder or awe, which in turn points us towards God. In *God in Search of Man*, Heschel writes that "religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid." In fact, Heschel goes so far as to declare that the future of humanity itself may depend upon our ability to experience wonder. What does Heschel mean by "wonder," and why is it so important that we be able to experience it?

GOD AS PARTNER

SHAI HELD

The core theological commitment that Heschel carried is not just that God needs people, but rather that God has chosen to need people. God does not want to be the only actor in the world. God doesn't want to redeem the world alone. God wants partners, God wants covenant partners. And that's a gamble. In Heschel theology, God takes an enormous gamble. If God relies on people, God can be sorely devastatingly disappointed. That's how the prophets talk. God is sorely, devastatingly disappointed at human failure, human cruelty, and human indifference in the face of human cruelty, all of that. That's a risk God takes in taking human beings seriously.

JAMES RUDIN

For Heschel God was a partner, and I know that's a lot of chutzpah, that's a lot of arrogance to say that, but I think as I read Heschel, that's what he thought. That God needs us as much as we need God, and that is a radical concept. Not that we're equal to God or we're God ourselves. No, but that the God of the universe needs God's creation, humanity, to be part of the divine economy, which is fancy language. It means to be part of the universe, to be part of it, that we have a responsibility. God has a responsibility. And for him of course and for Judaism in general there's a covenant. There's a covenant between the Jewish people and God beginning at Mount Sinai. And to fulfill the covenant, you fulfill it on both sides. So that was radical, and drew a lot of opposition from other Jewish religious thinkers who found that God is God, omnipotent, omnipresent, and that we are Servants of God. And for Heschel to say we work with God, we're partners with God, that was something very different.

CORNEL WEST

We should all read *God in Search of Man* because for Heschel his dissertation written on prophetic consciousness, this notion of divine pathos, what does it really mean to acknowledge that God needs us in the way that we need God and our calling is to be a partner with God to

engage in the mending of the world, repairing the damages of the world, transforming the world in light of the hurt, the pain, the misery, the suffering of other human beings never to be restricted to one group, one tribe, one clan. That Heschel understood when Amos talked about, "Let justice roll down like water," that was not just for Israel, that was for nations all around the world. It emerged out of Israel but it had a universal vision.

RELIGION IN DECLINE

SHARON BROUS

In his time, Heschel was speaking from deep within the American Jewish establishment, the religious establishment, but he was offering a stirring critique of what was broken in religious life. He said that religion was on the decline not because it was refuted but because it became irrelevant, dull, insipid, oppressive and that people were no longer moved to tears by religious encounter and religious experience in our religious institutions. But he so firmly believed that the world desperately needed people of faith and communities of faith to live into the best versions of who we were called to be in the world.

SHAI HELD

I think if you read Heschel carefully you realize that he has a sense of almost desperate urgency. We live in a world in which Auschwitz is possible. We live in a world in which African Americans can be degraded in unfathomable ways over hundreds of years in America. And we need a response or else the world will not be around much longer. I mean I have a sense of almost apocalyptic urgency in Heschel's writing. Apocalyptic is probably a misleading word. There's a sense of, we don't have lots of time to figure this out. Human beings in the modern world have to fundamentally change our ways, reorient the way we carry ourselves in the world or we're doomed. And he sees his job, I think -- he's a teacher of Judaism, he's a theologian, but he's also out to heal what he sees as broken in the culture. And what he sees as leading to a widespread dehumanization of others.

II. *The PROPHETS*

Heschel was engaged with and inspired by the nature and meaning of the Hebrew prophets from the time of his doctoral work in the early 1930s (in which he offered a new interpretation on the prophets) through his activity in the civil and human rights movements of the 1960s and early 1970s. Heschel saw the prophets as uniquely sharing in God's divine pathos, the emotional experience of being in relationship with humankind. Thus, the Hebrew prophets felt what God felt and they expressed those feelings in stunning biblical poetry, expressing their anger at injustice and disobedience or their joy and celebration in response to goodness and mercy. In his highly influential 1962 book *The Prophets*, which grew out of his earlier dissertation (written in German), Heschel elaborated on what it meant to be a prophet and how the prophet articulated the message. In effect, the Hebrew prophets expressed God's concern for God's people, stepping out of themselves in order to care for others. Although their message was not always perfect---they spoke with human tongues and human understandings---they conveyed God's intense

interest in and compassion for God's creation. To be prophetic, then, was to be concerned for others, and to stand up for justice, love, and mercy wherever needed or endangered. Heschel's love of the prophets as models of faith and action was something he shared with his close friend Martin Luther King, Jr. and other leaders of the civil rights movement, as well as with thinkers and public theologians including Reinhold Niebuhr.

Questions to Consider

1. Heschel wrote his dissertation on the prophets as Nazism was gaining influence in Germany. In what ways might his interpretation of the prophets reflect Heschel's own circumstances as a Jew in Germany in the early 1930s?
2. In the film, Shai Held suggests that Heschel went back to the prophets at times when the need to assert human dignity and justice was greatest. That is, in the 1930s in Germany and again in the 1960s in America. (Heschel published *The Prophets* in 1962.) For Heschel, the Hebrew prophets were foremost advocates for social justice. Do you agree with this interpretation of the prophets? Do they have special relevance in times when human dignity and the ideal of justice are threatened?

How might some German scholars' dismissal of the Hebrew Bible in the 1920s and '30s, largely due to anti-Semitism, have influenced the German church's ability to counter Nazism?

3. What, according to Heschel, are the primary characteristics of a prophet? Are the Hebrew prophets men and women with a special knowledge of the future or a special knowledge of or identification with God?
4. Susannah Heschel suggests that it was their shared appreciation for the Hebrew prophets that cemented the friendship of Heschel and Martin Luther King, Jr. and which drove much of their own activism. Do you see a connection here between Heschel's interpretation of the prophets' message and the work of both men in civil rights, against the war in Vietnam, and on behalf of marginalized groups (in Heschel's case, Jews under Soviet oppression)?
5. Arnold Eisen suggests that Heschel's work on the prophets is a "call to action," a challenge to modern-day readers to address injustice and inequity and to challenge oppressive authority as the Hebrew prophets did. Is this how you read the prophets, as exemplars of a way of living and of action that contemporary readers are to follow?
6. Heschel interprets the Hebrew prophets as men who are imbued with the divine pathos; that is, they feel what God feels for humankind and experience God's own joy or disappointment at human behavior. Can you imagine feeling what God feels? Do you envision God as having feelings or emotions, or of being affected by human actions in any way? Does this seem plausible to you?
7. At a birthday celebration for Heschel shortly before his own death, Martin Luther King, Jr. called Heschel a "true prophet." In fact, both men have been described as prophets by others within and beyond their own lifetimes. Do you consider Heschel a prophet? Do you think he

saw himself as one, or simply someone who helped amplify the voices of the classical prophets?

8. Like the ancient Hebrew prophets, Heschel also critiqued the religious institutions of his time, seeing much of contemporary Judaism as being wrapped in platitudes and inauthentic rituals. Is there a place for the prophet in critiquing contemporary religious practices, in whatever tradition? Is this a helpful role, in your opinion, or a destructive one? Can the prophet ever be a popular figure?

What price do prophets pay for challenging the status quo, in ancient times or today? Did Heschel pay a price for some of his stances, especially regarding civil rights and the Vietnam War?

9. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann praises Heschel for going beyond the established historical approach to the prophets. What do you think Heschel adds to the centuries-old discussion and understanding of the Hebrew prophets? What role does poetry and metaphor play in Heschel's conception of the prophet?

WRITING "*THE PROPHETS*"

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN

When Heschel took up *The Prophets*, he obviously would have been immersed in historical critical study which would treat the prophetic text as a text to be analyzed. And the great thing about Heschel is that he knew the whole historical, critical process but did not linger there. He went beyond it, and behind it, and beneath it to look at what was actually happening in the text. And he had the freedom and the imagination to let the God who occupies the text be present in his scholarship. This was an incredibly nerve-y thing to do in Berlin because all of the German because all of the German scholars would have stayed at the historical, critical, objective level and the greatness of his book is that he didn't stay there. He went underneath that to discover the passion and the person of God that was mediated by the poetry.

SUSANNAH HESCHEL

So I think what motivated his study of the prophets was first of all, as a critique of the German theological tradition that had depicted the prophets in a rather negative way, and he writes about this in the book. That depicted prophetic experience as somehow-- they would say the prophets were writhing on the ground in a state of ecstasy, not even knowing what they were saying, etc. He found this appalling. Aaron Strelch in December 1915 gave a lecture and said that the

prophets came from rural villages and they would come to an urban center with a king and an army and an economy and they would say you have to worry about widows and orphans. How absurd, how ridiculous. They're country bumpkins these prophets, they don't know how the world works. And this was a complete repudiation of German Judaism which said the Judaism is about the prophetic tradition of justice, was a repudiation of Hermann Cohen, of all of the great German Jewish philosophers. So in part my father's dissertation was to repudiate that tradition of German Theology that denigrated prophets. And really is a terribly unfortunate thing because they made it impossible for Germany to call on the prophetic tradition of social justice, of economic justice the way we can do in the United States. They didn't give them the resources to protest when Hitler was coming to power.

FROM THE PROPHETS' VIEW

BENJAMIN SAX

So, the prophets for Heschel understand that the world is fragmented and fractured and that we need to play a role in building it in such a way that God flourishes. Prophets are the ones that take people out of their sense of comfort and complicity with everyday life and problematize it so that they start thinking beyond their own needs or their own particularities. And that even works on a community level. The prophets are the ones that see an injustice in one place and see that as an injustice everywhere.

ARNOLD EISEN

The prophet feels God's pain, the prophet suffers with God. And Heschel is feeling the suffering of his family and millions of Jews and millions of others and then he sees the suffering of people in the United States of America, which is supposed to be the one who's fighting against all this bad stuff, because they're black. And it's like he can't not ally himself with King. It's a meeting on every level: mind, soul, commitment, everything.

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN

We have no other book like Heschel's on the prophets because he dares to think that this poetic testimony by the prophets is the truth of who God is. So, God is capable of a whole range of

emotional extremity that can only be expressed in poetic cadence. He lays that all out in a way that is without imitation by anyone else. He understood that the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Bible is about this God who has so entered into history with all of its aches, pains, hurts, and disappointments. And that this God remains faithful. I think that at the center of his great book on the prophets is his study of the prophet Jeremiah and more than any other prophet in the Hebrew bible, Jeremiah dares to give voice to what it was like to be face to face with God. So, Jeremiah quarrels with God, rebukes God, reprimands God, and prays to God, thanks God.

CORNEL WEST

Christians often fundamentally misunderstand prophetic Judaism or think that somehow Jews are only speaking to Jews rather than Jews speaking to Jews and the rest of the world. With Jesus of course you have a universal vision indeed, but Jesus comes out of prophetic Judaism and Isaiah and Jeremiah and Esther and the others already put forward this notion of each and every human being having a sanctity to be made in the image and likeness of God. Heschel understood that. And his book, *The Prophets*, is still the most powerful takes ever written on the great gift of Jews to the world, the prophetic tradition.

III. Repairing the World –God and Humankind as Partners

The idea of repairing or restoring a broken world is central to much of Heschel's thought, particularly that surrounding the prophets and the prophetic tradition. Heschel conceived of God and humankind as partners in restoring the things that were broken in the world, especially relationships. When it came to civil and human rights, there was no question for Heschel as to what he was called to do. The example of the prophets and the terms of the ancient covenant between God and Israel made clear that we are to stand with others for justice and righteousness and to address oppression and injustice wherever they are to be found. One of Heschel's most visible and most important public moments came when, at no small risk to himself and his reputation within parts of the Jewish community, he joined Martin Luther King, Jr. and other Black leaders to march for justice in Selma, Alabama. In so doing, he said he felt like "my legs were praying"---that, in joining the march, Heschel was combining physical action with soul

action, walking in the metaphorical steps of his Hasidic forebears, as his daughter, Susannah, has written.

Questions to Consider

1. Congressman John Lewis, who led the “Bloody Sunday” march in Selma, Alabama in 1965, points out that many African-Americans identified with the Jewish experience, particularly that of being a people in captivity. Why might this have been an important connection for the civil rights movement?

A. On the other hand, Heschel’s daughter, Susannah, remembers her father saying that, if there were any hope for Judaism in America, it would come from the Black church. What did Heschel mean by that?

2. Scholar Cornel West implies in the film that, in coming to Selma in March 1965 to march beside Martin Luther King, Jr., Heschel “wasn’t just uttering words. He was putting it all on the line.” Why was it important to King and other leaders that Heschel be there, and why was it important to Heschel? How did Heschel’s presence at Selma, and the dangers associated with it, reflect his commitment to the tradition represented by the ancient Hebrew prophets whom he had studied? In what ways was Heschel’s presence also a critique of certain contemporary Jewish perspectives, as West suggests?
3. What does Rabbi Sharon Brous mean when, reflecting on Heschel at Selma, she asserts that “you can't take Torah seriously, you can't take the Hebrew Bible seriously and not then translate the encounter between Moses and Pharaoh into the immediate, into understanding what was happening with race relations in America. . . . “

What public issues or concerns today would lead you to speak out in a prophetic way?

4. What does Rabbi Brous mean when she says that Heschel knew it was important for him and for other Jews to be part of the American civil rights movement because of the Holocaust? How did the experience of the Holocaust possibly influence Heschel’s thinking and that of other Jews with regard to what was happening to Blacks in America? Is there an irony in the fact that many Jews like Heschel stood with Christians in America in the 1960s, while most Christians in 1930s Germany did not stand with Jews like Heschel and his family?
5. What do you think Sax means when, thinking of Heschel and King, he says that “prophets are the ones that take people out of their sense of comfort and complicity with everyday life and problematize it, so that they start thinking beyond their own needs”? In what ways are both Heschel and King taking people out of their comfort zones and “problematizing” the status quo of everyday life in America in the 1960s?
6. Heschel famously wrote that, in marching with King at Selma he felt like his legs “were praying.” What do you think Heschel meant by that? In what way might his involvement at

Selma be seen as prayer? How did Heschel connect piety and action, and how does that reflect his understanding of the Hebrew prophets?

7. A number of civil rights leaders, including Martin Luther King, Jr. and Andrew Young, saw Heschel's presence at Selma as lending a unique spiritual authority to an event that had strong political and social overtones. It was important for leaders like King and Young that the civil rights movement be grounded in a spiritual foundation. How did Heschel's presence and support help with that?
8. Why, according to civil rights historian Taylor Branch, was Heschel's involvement with King and other Christian leaders so controversial within parts of the Jewish community? What risks was Heschel taking in engaging with these Christian leaders? How was that complicated by the fact that King and others of these leaders were Black?
9. What does Taylor Branch mean when, interpreting Heschel, he says that the prophets "were the first men in history to regard power and justice as opposites"? How does that reflect Heschel's understanding of the prophetic tradition and his reasons for being involved in the American civil rights movement?
10. At a time when so much turmoil is underway in America, what does Heschel's life and legacy show us about the need for individuals to seek inner spiritual depth while at the same time being present on the streets demanding social change? Are they connected? Do the social movements of today recognize the need for individual spiritual growth?
11. What does Shai Held mean when he says that, for Heschel, "overcoming the sin of indifference was everything," especially in light of the Holocaust? How might a concern about indifference---to segregation and discrimination---have led Heschel to march at Selma in 1965? And why did Heschel in his later year take up the cause of Soviet Jews again raising concerns about indifference?

THE STRUGGLE

JOHN LEWIS

We in the African American church from time to time would compare ourselves to the Children of Israel and we would sing the songs. We identified with that struggle; we have been held as slaves, held in bondage and the church, the religious institution provided us with a way out. We have been beaten and jailed, we would just sing a hymn of the church and it would lift you. So there were probably some people that didn't believe, but in the process of being involved in the movement, but they converted to the idea of singing the hymns molded them. So the Church, the religious institution became a haven for all of us.

TAYLOR BRANCH

Heschel was controversial within the Jewish community both because he reached out to Christians at a time when the Jewish community, feeling wounded-for good reason by the Holocaust-and teachings of Christianity that they were a deicide people, were saying we don't have anything to do with Christians. But also, for reaching out to black people...It's like a double whammy. We're trying to fit in here in America and you're upsetting the Christians about what Jews think and you're also saying that we need to be allied with black people which will further expose the Jewish communities in the South.

FEED THE SOUL

SHARON BROUS

There are a couple of elements of Heschel's teachings around Judaism that I think are really important as we think about what it means to live into a Jewish experience or Jewish life that he so beautifully wrote about it and called us toward. One is really understanding the inner life, really recognizing that each of us is called to explore and to nurture and to nourish a soul. That you can have all the books and you can say all the right words and you can show up on time but if we don't pay attention to and work the to feed the soul then it's all empty and meaningless. That is matched with a kind of prophetic activism, that it's not enough to nurture the soul and feed ourselves and create environments in which we can dance and cry, but we also have to translate our core values into the demands of the society that we're living in. And a lot of Heschel's activism especially in his later years was really rooted in that belief. That he saw and knew and understood that you can't take Torah seriously, you can't take the Hebrew Bible seriously and not then translate the encounter between Moses and Pharaoh into the immediate, into understanding what was happening with race relations in America.

JAMES RUDIN

So you cannot understand Heschel's commitment to the American Civil Rights Movement without understanding where it was coming from. It wasn't just political, he wasn't running for any political office, he was not the chairman of some committee, he was coming out of his own experiential life as a committed Jew and who knew a lot about the prophets. And he said if Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah were here, they would be shaking the finger at the community, pointing

out the errors. Not in hatred but in love, that you can be better, you can do better. Always remember, the prophets chastised the people but they loved the people of Israel. Well Heschel, and I would say Dr Martin Luther King obviously, they loved America but they thought America was not living up to its potential greatness, what it promised itself, what we promised ourselves as Americans. So Heschel took his concept of prophecy and brought it into Selma and many other places. And that was a driving force.

WORLD OF INDIFFERENCE

SHAI HELD

I think on some level he felt, how could I be a theologian and an interpreter for tradition who talks about the sanctity of human life, who talks about the ways that God cares precisely and deeply about the widow and the orphan and allow the Civil Rights Movement to pass me by? How is that even coherent? How do you write about the prophet Amos, knowing that the prophet Amos would have been involved in the Civil Rights Movement, and just say, ‘No thanks. I’d rather hang out of my library, parsing words of the prophet Amos.’ You can’t do it, not if you really hear the prophets making a claim on you, which I think he did. The Bible was alive for Heschel in some very basic way. This wasn’t just a book he was studying as a cultural artifact. This was a book that, as it were, seized him by the lapels. What are you going to do?

BENJAMIN SAX

I would say that one of Heschel’s major theological contributions is to say that one can be the victim, like Jews in the Holocaust, and Jews who suffer from anti-Semitism, and yet, slip into a safe space in Whiteness in this particular context. And here is a Jewish theologian that says “No, I will not let you be complicit. The prophets won’t let you, God won’t let you, you have a responsibility if you’re talking about otherness and loving the stranger to strip yourself of that privilege, to lean into that discomfort, and accept the racism that bedevils all aspects of this society, and work towards changing the conditions so that you can let God back into the world. And I think that that is a major part of Heschel’s contribution to American Jewish theological life.

SHAI HELD

He lived in excruciating ways with the reality that as the world and the family he grew up in was destroyed in Europe, most of the world was in fact indifferent. So, overcoming the sin of indifference was everything to him, it was kind of making repair for a world that was broken enough to allow a Holocaust to take place. There you see the Bible and his own biography really coming into dialogue with each other.

IV. No Religion is an Island: Heschel and Interfaith Concerns

Heschel's experience of the Holocaust, in which he lost his mother and three sisters, was an all-too-real evocation of what can happen when people of religious faith do not stand up against evil and oppression. Speaking out of his Jewish tradition, Heschel saw religion as the antidote to the ills of modernity, including the problem of nihilism, which denies meaning and value. In 1965, Heschel became a visiting professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York (the first non-Christian to be so honored), and gave an inaugural lecture on ecumenism called "*No Religion is an Island*." In that lecture, Heschel argues that religious pluralism is the will of God---that no religion exists in isolation from the others---and that, in the modern world, religious persons must choose between being interfaith or "inter-nihilistic." "The voice of God reaches the spirit of man in a variety of ways," Heschel writes. The 1965 lecture exemplifies Heschel's approach to and engagement with persons and institutions of other faiths, particularly Christianity.

Heschel didn't simply speak about interfaith cooperation, he lived it. In the early 1960s, he was instrumental in helping to shape relations between Christians and Jews through early and ongoing critiques of *Nostra Aetate*, a revolutionary statement on Jewish-Christian relations that came out of Vatican II. In his work with Catholic scholars who were preparing this statement, Heschel urged the Catholic church to address and reject historic anti-Semitic attitudes and teachings, which it did. Likewise, Heschel organized religious leaders of different faiths to come together to confront the violence and injustices of the Vietnam War, co-founding the influential organization Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam, which included King, William Sloan Coffin, and others. At the end of his life, Heschel was still seeking out interfaith dialogue and cooperative action, visiting activist friend and Catholic priest Philip Berrigan upon the latter's release from prison for nonviolent disobedience. Philip and his brother Daniel, both

Catholic priests, were among the high-profile figures from other religious traditions who joined Heschel in opposing the violence of the Vietnam War.

Questions to Consider:

1. In the film, Shai Held says that Heschel “came to think that religious diversity was God's will, that God wanted to be worshipped in a variety of ways in a range of ways, in different languages, in different religious images.” Do you agree with this thinking? Are there multiple pathways to God or a single, exclusive one?

Considering the time in which Heschel was writing and teaching, would an affirmation of religious diversity---implicitly challenging exclusive claims to religious truth---have been risky or even dangerous? Are there religious communities that would oppose that view today?

2. In his lecture *No Religion is an Island*, Heschel asserts that, at a time when religion itself is under attack by the forces of nihilism, people of all faiths need to come together to defend the importance and even the necessity of religious understanding. Do you agree with this argument?
3. What was Heschel's contribution to the creation of *Nostra Aetate*? How did that statement revolutionize Catholic thinking about the Jewish people? What was Heschel's role in changing Catholic teaching about the Jews as deicides (i.e. “Christ killers”) and in regard to Jewish conversion to Christianity at the end of time? What did Heschel mean when he said that he would “rather go to Auschwitz” than be forced to surrender his Jewish identity and convert to Christianity?
4. Why was it so important that Heschel help the Catholic church reverse the historical “teaching of contempt” about the Jewish people? How had that teaching drastically and tragically influenced the course of history in the West? What did Heschel want the Catholic church's new statement on the Jews to affirm about them?
5. Heschel had a secret audience with Pope Paul VI, who presided over many of the momentous changes that came out of Vatican II. What sort of public statement did it make that a Jewish scholar had met with a Catholic pope? Why was Heschel's initial meeting with Paul VI so controversial?
6. Is Rabbi James Rudin right in suggesting that Heschel's involvement with Cardinal Bea and other Catholic thinkers during Vatican II can be a model for interfaith cooperation today and for how we perceive people of other faiths?
7. Heschel was a central figure in creating Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam (CALCAV), and he also influenced Martin Luther King, Jr. in coming out against the war,

perhaps one of the most important moments of the anti-war movement. Why do you think it was important for Heschel to bring members of other religious traditions together to confront what he saw as the injustices of the war? Is this another way in which he was breaking with tradition to call people from different religious backgrounds together in common cause?

8. In the 1950s and 1960s, Heschel became friends with leading figures in other traditions, including Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and Roman Catholic monk and writer Thomas Merton. How do these friendships exemplify Heschel's idea that no religion is "an island," and that religious pluralism was not only a good thing, but a necessary one?
9. Heschel is often described as a mystic? He was professor of Jewish mysticism at Jewish Theological Seminary and wrote on mysticism as early as 1949 when he wrote *The Mystical Element in Judaism*. There he said mysticism presupposes "a yearning after the unattainable, a need to grasp with the senses what is hidden from the mind." How do you describe a mystic? Is there a connection between Heschel's mysticism and his involvement in social justice?

TEACHING OF CONTEMPT

MARY C. BOYS

The history between Jews and Christians in general, but particularly Jews and Catholics, is a very tragic one. In a way, when we stand here, we see the long arc of history. And we see that from the beginning as was understood then that the writings of the New Testament, particularly the gospels and the Gospels of John, present Jesus -- he's a Jew but he seems to be against the Jews. And the crucifixion as John's account has it, makes the Jews the ones who cry, "crucify him! crucify him!" And we rehearse this every Good Friday, so anyone who goes to church on Good Friday hears this and it's very evocative.

So, the Jews became blamed for the crucifixion of Jesus even though, historically, it's the Roman Empire in the personage of Pontius Pilate who has the power to crucify. And there were thousands and thousands of Jews who were crucified in the Roman Empire. But that fact was really lost and so over time it developed from a rhetorical opposition to these Jews to when the church gets power, political power, it really enforced segregation between Jews and Catholics.

TAYLOR BRANCH

It was an incredible ecumenical statement and response to the Holocaust and to World War Two. It took a long time coming and not without tremendous struggles within the church. Catholic bishops, and archbishops, and cardinals warned that there would be riots against Catholics and Christians in Arab countries if they were nice to the Jews because Muslims would take that as a sign of betrayal of them. I mean this is international politics and theology and the heart...some Catholics saw the facts that the teaching that Jews killed Jesus as central to Christianity. How are we going to back down on that?

JAMES RUDIN on why *Nostra Aetate* was necessary

The phrase that covers it all is “the teaching of contempt.” If you teach young children contempt for another group, they're inferior and they're not beloved by God, they're not worthy of God's love, that they missed the boat theologically 2000 years ago, their religion has been superseded and taken over by Christianity, that's contempt. . . And the teaching of contempt had to be addressed, confronted, and overcome. It's like you have a pathology and you have to medically identify it, diagnose it, and then treat it. So, the teaching of contempt for Jews and Judaism runs and ran very deep. And that's what the Bishops had to confront at the Vatican Council and that's what interreligious affairs.

MARY C. BOYS

A French historian, a Jew who had been hidden by a Catholic woman during the Second World War had used his historical research to trace what he came to call “the teaching of contempt.” That is how the Catholic Church in particular has taught about Jews and Judaism over the centuries. And in this June meeting he, Jules Isaac, was 83 and Pope John is 79 and Pope John's trusted Lieutenant, as it were, Cardinal Augustine Bea, also 79, met together for about 15 minutes. And something happened between the two. And it's at that time that the Pope decides let's put this question our relationship with the Jews on the agenda of the council and then he turned to Cardinal Bea and asked him to oversee that. A momentous meeting, 83 and 79. Who says old people can't change the world?

GOD'S WILL

SHAI HELD

He came to think that religious diversity was God's will, that God wanted to be worshipped in a variety of ways in a range of ways, in different languages, in different religious images. And he wanted to find the theological way to not only legitimate interfaith conversation but to make it necessary to almost demand it or expect it.

SUSANNAH HESCHEL on Heschel and *Nostra Aetate*

My father wanted the repudiation of any effort to convert the Jews, that was extremely important to him. He wanted a rejection of anti-Semitism of course, but he also wanted something positive. He wanted the church have institutions that would foster an understanding of Judaism, and working together, and so forth. So there were three statements issued, the first two drafts, then the final one. When the second draft appeared, it called for a hope for the eventual conversion of the Jews. My father was very upset about that, he called it spiritual fratricide. And he said and it was quoted in the papers, "If given the choice, I would go to Auschwitz before I would give up my faith."

A REVOLUTION

JAMES RUDIN, on *Nostra Aetate*

Clearly, it's a revolution. I hold it out as a model in a world that is polarized politically and culturally and ideologically. If Jews and Christians, two very ancient communities with long memories, if they can start the process of coming together in true dialogue, not monologues where you yell at each other, then it's a model for other groups---ethnic, racial, political groups. So, it is a revolution. *Nostra Aetate*, "in our time." It's about time, and we have shown that it can be done. It takes effort on both sides to overcome long-standing prejudices, insecurities, a sense of fear and dread even after 1900 years of being estranged from one another but it can be done.

JOHN CONNELLY

The document *Nostra Aetate* was a revolutionary statement because it was the first church statement that said that God loves the Jewish people. It was a statement that made clear that the

object of this divine love was indeed a people that represented a tradition that was a religious tradition but it wasn't simply a religion. There's a complexity to Judaism that the church recognizes in this final document. It also breaks decisively with the core of the anti-Judaic message that Jews were thought of previously as Christ-killers. It was stated explicitly that Jews could not be held accountable for the death of Christ, that Christ had died because of the sins of all human beings and for the sake of all humanity. And it recognized an enduring vocation to the Jewish people, of the Jewish people over time that would persist to the end of time.

BENJAMIN SAX

So, one of the great achievements of Abraham Joshua Heschel in the American Jewish community was his ability to allow American Jews to think about interreligious dialogue in a productive way. It was very difficult for Jews, and I will put a footnote that Jews had a tough relationship with American Christians and Christianity in general since most Jews blamed Christian theological language for the conditions by which Nazi Germany took place. There was a lot of anti-Jewish sentiment in the New Testament that has played its role historically in terms of violence, ghetto-ization, etc. For all the history that Christians learn about themselves, what they don't learn are the things that Jews memorize. So, Jews have a tempestuous relationship with Christianity. And Heschel had this almost uncanny ability to take something so fraught within the Jewish community and see it as something potentially productive theologically.

JAMES RUDIN, Heschel's impact on interfaith relations

He made it kosher. He made it legitimate for other rabbis and Jewish lay people to enter into positive, constructive, meaningful relationships with not only the Roman Catholic Church with all forms of Christianity and other religions including today Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, other religions throughout the world. Because the sense was, to put it in simplest terms, if Abraham Joshua Heschel, revered and beloved in the Jewish community for all that he represented, if he could do it, and not only do it but be a leader. Not only in the United States but to go to Rome and confront the highest officials, leaders of the Roman Catholic Community, if he could do it, then we could do it too and that it was okay, it was legitimate, it was something not outside the bounds of traditional Judaism or Jewish life to enter into positive in a religious relations. So in a sense he cleared the path for us.

V. Heschel and the Vietnam War

As already noted, Heschel was an early opponent of the Vietnam War. He saw it as an act of violence against God as well as against fellow human beings, and by organizing Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam (CALCAV), Heschel sought to bring leaders of different religious traditions together to oppose the war. Heschel's stance was controversial within the Jewish community and outside of it---he attracted the attention of the FBI---but it was he as much as anyone who helped bring Martin Luther King, Jr. into the anti-war movement, adding a powerful voice to the cause. Heschel introduced King when the latter came out against the war in a famous speech at New York City's Riverside Church in April 1967. Once, when asked why he was participating in one of many demonstrations against the war, Heschel responded that it was because he could not pray. "Whenever I open the prayer book," he explained, "I see before me images of children burning from napalm." For Heschel, it was impossible to speak about God and remain silent about the violence, terror, and injustice of Vietnam. In Heschel's view, the war undermined the very values of justice, mercy, and compassion that he and the prophets before him had lived by.

Questions to Consider:

1. Why was Heschel's vocal and very visible opposition to the Vietnam War so controversial in some quarters of American Judaism? What did American Jews have to lose by opposing the war? What might they gain by supporting it?
2. What was the basis for Heschel's opposition to the Vietnam War? How did he relate the teachings of the prophets to what was happening in Vietnam? Why did Heschel view the fight against Hitler in World War II as necessary, while the Vietnam War was a tragic and deeply unjust event?
3. Why did Heschel, King, and other members of CALCAV hold a prayer vigil in Arlington Cemetery in February 1968? What was the significance of bringing the Torah scrolls to that protest? Do you think Heschel, King, and the others were taking a great risk?
3. Benjamin Sax suggests that, by opposing the Vietnam War, Heschel was "putting at risk his life's work to do the right thing," and that Heschel was aware of what his actions might cost him. Do you agree with this assessment?
4. Several commentators suggest that, by taking controversial public stands, such as opposition to the Vietnam War, King and Heschel sometimes found themselves socially or politically isolated. Nonetheless, they had each other to lean on, support, and take inspiration from. How do you envision their relationship? What do you imagine were its primary attributes?

YOU HAVE TO BE CONSISTENT

SUSANNAH HESCHEL

My father was not a pacifist and he was not a communist sympathizer by any means. But killing civilians, that was unacceptable. Anyway my father terribly concerned about the war in Vietnam '63, '64, '65. He and a few people from Union Seminary and Christian friends held a press conference as clergy, as theologians to protest the war in Vietnam. The Berrigans were with them, William Sloane Coffin, who was then Chaplain at Yale University, John Bennett, and several others. At the end of the press conference-- By the way, Richard John Newhouse who was then Lutheran, became Catholic later-- At the end of the press conference one of the reporters said, "Alright you're against the war but now what are you going to do about it?" And my father said, "We are founding an organization of clergy and laymen against the war in Vietnam." And the others looked at him, "We are?" But they did.

MICHAEL LERNER

So it was a courageous thing for him to do and a wonderful thing, but it was not calculated. He didn't think that way, he thought about what the moral obligation is, not how is this going to affect me if I speak of that moral obligation. He heard God's voice telling him to talk to tell the American people and tell American Jews, you can't support this war anymore. You've got to stop this war, killing is not the way, and killing is not a path to peace. All that killing ever does is give you a momentary stop in the killing and then new killing happens. So he was a man of deep integrity in relationship to that war, but it hurt him.

CORNEL WEST

Rabbi Heschel was farther ahead than Martin [Luther King] when it came to Vietnam. He's the one that put pressure on Martin, along with Stokely Carmichael, Vincent Harding, and others to come out against the war. It was Heschel who introduced him at Riverside church on April 4th, 1967, one year before Martin was murdered and assassinated. It was Heschel who said, you have to be consistent, Martin. You can't condemn violence in Alabama and Mississippi and not also condemn violence in Vietnam. You have to acknowledge the ways in which our own country is a

larger conveyor of violence in the world. That's exactly what Martin did on that April 4th, 1967 day, and that speech got him in trouble too.

BENJAMIN SAX

Martin Luther King strongly encouraged Heschel to play a role in the civil rights movement even when it was unpopular within his own Jewish community to take public stances the way that he did. Heschel encouraged Martin Luther King in the same way to take a stance against the Vietnam War that might have been unpopular too in the broader community too, for the sake of justice. That somehow in both of their concerns for the prophetic impulse and prophetic religiosity, they have to look beyond their own present circumstances and how they'll be received by their communities and the broader community, and essentially do what is right. The prophet doesn't think about her or his own destiny in relation to the rest of the community. You do it because it's the right thing to do.

SUSANNAH HESCHEL

So my father encouraged Dr. King to speak out against the war and it was under the auspices of clergy and laymen concerned about Vietnam that Dr King gave that speech. Yes, my father came to the conclusion that he should encourage Dr. King. And part of it was also, what murder was being committed in our name, by our government? Murdering people in Vietnam. We were taking our young men, at the time and turning them into murderers.

THE PRICE TO PAY

BENJAMIN SAX

When he came out against the Vietnam War for example, there were a lot of Jewish presses and a lot of Jewish leadership that spoke out against him. There was a lot of criticism about his leader, about his point of view, he was considered naïve. Worse he was considered theologically naïve. That what he was doing was undermining the safety of his own people and undermining the safety of our country. And that aspiring to these universal...patriotic values was something that at least many in the Jewish community wanted to put out there even if they were uncomfortable with the reasons we were in Vietnam. And so, it also put his reputation at risk.

VI. Heschel and Jewish Tradition

Jewish tradition and culture, especially that of Eastern Europe, played an enormous part in shaping Heschel's identity. He was born in Warsaw, Poland, descended on both sides from long and illustrious lines of Hasidic rebbes, Jewish rabbinical and spiritual leaders whose positions were passed down from father to son. Heschel's family tradition, Hasidism, was (and remains) a pietistic and partly mystical Jewish spiritual tradition dating back to the eighteenth century. Its founder, known as the Baal Shem Tov ("master of the good name"), and his teachings are held in great reverence. However, Heschel found himself straddling the pietistic traditions of his ancestors and the exacting but engaging culture of German intellectual life. He became a rabbi and a professor instead of the rebbe of a Hasidic community. Nonetheless, as his daughter, Susannah, asserts, Heschel's Hasidic roots and spiritual disposition can be discerned in almost all of his writing and thinking. Tragically, the world of Eastern European Jewry from which Heschel descended was all but extinguished in the Holocaust, or Shoah. His 1950 book, *The Earth is the Lord's*, the first book Heschel published after coming to America in 1940, is an elegy for that lost world, which Heschel saw as providing an essential spiritual foundation for Judaism itself. It was a vital Judaism, combining contemporary practice and interpretation of scripture with traditional Hasidic piety, which Heschel argued was the "antidote" to the ills that plagued the modern world. The more humankind pursued power and self-interest, the more it needed what religion, and specifically, this vital Jewish tradition, had to offer.

Questions to Consider:

1. What is Hasidism, and how did it influence Heschel's life and thought? Do you think Heschel's insistence on combining traditional piety with rigorous scholarship is reflective of his Hasidic background?

Within Judaism, what distinguishes Hasidism from Reform and Conservative Judaisms, as well as from other forms of Orthodox Judaism?

2. Heschel's decision to study in Germany and undertake work toward a PhD at the University of Berlin was significant. What did it mean in terms of the Hasidic culture he had come from? In what ways is Heschel already straddling different worlds---the religious and the secular, the pietistic and the intellectual? Did he have to abandon his pietistic Hasidic roots when he entered the University of Berlin, or were the two worlds largely compatible?

3. Jewish philosopher and religious thinker Martin Buber was a friend, mentor, and important intellectual influence on Heschel during the latter's years in Germany. Author of *I and Thou* (1923), one of the most important works of twentieth-century religious philosophy, Buber

supported Heschel's academic aspirations and made it possible for his younger colleague to succeed Buber as director of the *Judisches Lehrhaus* in Frankfurt, an experimental center for adult Jewish education.

Like Heschel, Buber wished to connect different strands of European Judaism, deeply valued and wrote about the Hebrew prophets, and was attracted to Hasidism, although not born into the tradition as was Heschel. However, Heschel and Buber had very different approaches to the importance of Jewish law and practice. How would you describe the differences between Heschel and Buber when it comes to Jewish tradition and religious ritual?

4. Looking back on his days as a doctoral student in Germany, Heschel told a story about walking the streets of Berlin lost in thoughts about his studies until he realized that the sun was going down, indicating a time for prayer. As Heschel told it, he stopped then and there on a busy street to say his evening prayers, somewhat rebuking himself for almost forgetting them, being so lost in thoughts of other things. How does this story reflect the ways Heschel attempted to transcend or merge the different worlds of his experience? How does it foreshadow the ways that he straddled different traditions and ideologies after he came to America? Looking at it another way, how does the story convey Heschel's argument that American Jews needed to return to foundational principles of their tradition and heritage?

5. Rabbi Sharon Brous suggests that Heschel's life was an embodiment of an archetypal and recurring Jewish experience of rootedness, persecution, exile, and re-establishment which can be traced back to the Bible. How is this movement reflected in Heschel's own journey from Poland to Germany and, ultimately, America?

6. The Holocaust, or Shoah, touched Heschel directly and tragically. He lost his mother and three sisters under the Nazi regime and was forced to leave his culture and his homeland. Heschel's daughter, Susannah, recalls that her father rarely spoke of the family members he had lost, but that when he did, it was with overwhelming sadness. Yet, Heschel refused to blame God for what had happened, suggesting that, instead of asking God "Where were you?," the proper response was to recognize that God was actually asking us: "Where were *you*?" If humans were to be partners with God in restoring the world, we were responsible for what we did or allowed to happen in it. Do you agree with this assessment? Is God effectively "off the hook" regarding the Holocaust? Do you believe this is what Heschel is suggesting? (Scholar Shai Held argues that Heschel's response to the Holocaust is, ultimately, inadequate, and a weakness in his theology.) Does God bear some responsibility for what happened in the Holocaust?

7. Heschel felt that, in addition to extinguishing over six million Jewish lives, the Holocaust also nearly extinguished a tradition of Eastern European Jewry that stretched back hundreds of years. He wrote about this tradition and its loss in the 1949 book *The Earth is the Lord's: The Inner World of the Jew in Eastern Europe*. What was important to Heschel in this tradition, and what would its loss represent for Jews like Heschel in the post-Holocaust world?

8. How would you describe Heschel's relationship with American Judaism? How did he straddle various traditions here (Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox), and do you think he was successful in doing this? (You may recall Heschel's famous assertion, "I am not a Jew looking for an adjective.") His daughter, Susannah, writes: "My father did not prescribe a particular Jewish path but acknowledged that there are many ways of being Jewish; authenticity is too personal for Judaism to be prescribed collectively" (Introduction, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Essential Writings*, 44). Do you agree with this assessment? Would it work for other traditions with which you may be familiar, such as Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism?

9. Heschel was one of the first American Jewish leaders to speak out on behalf of the plight of Jews in the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 70s. Nobel Prize-winning author Elie Wiesel, himself a survivor of the Holocaust, called Heschel "the first to raise his voice" on the matter and credited Heschel with spurring him (Wiesel) to action on behalf of Soviet Jews. Yet Heschel also faced criticism from other American Jewish leaders for his outspoken stance. Why was this the case? What was Heschel risking in speaking out for Soviet Jews, and how did his support for them reflect his prophetic approach to public engagement?

10. Heschel welcomed the creation of the state of Israel and saw it as a promise for Jews everywhere, a safe homeland where Jewish traditions, customs, and religion were honored and practiced. However, his stand on Vietnam was unpopular with Israeli leaders, who feared it could negatively influence American-Israeli relations, and his celebration of Israel's victory in the Six-Day War of 1967 was tempered by disappointment at Israel's failure to seek a lasting peace with its neighbors. In his 1969 book *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*, Heschel suggested that Israel was as much an idea as a place, declaring that "[t]he presence of Israel is the repudiation of despair," and that the young nation's very existence should solicit "a renewal of trust in the Lord of history."

What factors made Heschel's relationship with Israel so complex? What did he affirm about it and what did he critique? Do you agree with Rabbi Michael Lerner in the film that, if he were alive today, Heschel would be critical of some of Israel's current policies? Which ones?

TRADITION

SHAI HELD

He was able to articulate an enormously compelling vision of the Jewish tradition and of how it could function to heal what ails the modern world. In many ways he had a vision of the ways that modernity was a culture that was lost, and Judaism, he believed, had an awful lot of answers that could heal the broken spirit of the modern world. Abraham Joshua Heschel was also a

tremendous role model in the sense that he not only articulated a vision of what Judaism demanded, but he lived it and modeled it for people and that's always a very powerful model.

CORNEL WEST, of Heschel at Hebrew Union College

He represented the old world. And he was concerned about the holiness of Jewish life in the old world, but that old world had been destroyed by Nazism. So many of the movers and shakers at the seminary were much more concerned about the new world, much more concerned about assimilating, adjusting and adapting, correlating elements of the old with elements of the new. Whereas Heschel was unapologetic, unabashedly rooted in the prophetic tradition of the old world. So that in his coming to the United States, and New York City five years later, he knew he would be an outsider, and he was right.

SHAI HELD

One thing that I think was really fundamental to him, that I suspect made him also feel very lonely in America is having grown up in a Hasidic environment in Eastern Europe. He had a palpable sense of God's presence and I think as we know, in modern secularized Western society, not that many people have that. I suspect that's one of the ways he felt a gap between himself and a lot of people he was writing for and talking to. Heschel had a very hard time actually accepting the idea that someone can be a good faith atheist. It was just so obvious to him that there was a God who cared about him, with expectations of him. And that was -- I think on some level the sense of being commanded, being obligated to behave in a certain way in the world, to respond in a certain way to God and other people is what drove him in life and fed his sense of urgency.

JAMES RUDIN

You can see Heschel came out of that background as did Elie Wiesel. So that there was a sense, not that you abandon learning but that there's much more to the Jewish religion than just learning in a Yeshiva, or an academy, or a house of learning, or in a schoolhouse. That there's wonderment in nature and love of all of this and song. And this had a remarkable attraction. You can understand, for a downtrodden people under authoritarian political regimes and anti-Semitism, official anti-Semitism from the governing authority wherever it was in Eastern Europe, that yes I'm a child of God and I can find God through my joy and my experiential

religious affirmations. So it was a radical revolutionary movement, also opposed by a lot of the establishment as all such movements often are. And again one cannot understand Abraham Heschel without understanding this was the background from which he came.

BENJAMIN SAX

If you were to ask anyone what kind of a Jew Heschel was, you're going to get a number of different answers. He's influenced by the *Hasidism* of his youth and then a mature engagement of that *Hasidism* as a scholar. He's influenced by German-Jewish intellectual culture. He's influenced by American Jewish political life. He's influenced by the Civil Rights Movement. He's influenced by the plight of African Americans in this country. He taught at a Jewish Reform Seminary and a Jewish Conservative Seminary. He lived out so many different aspects of world Jewry that it would be impossible to talk about him as any one type of religious Jew. And yet, he is one of the most important spokespeople for American Jewish tradition today. And yet, no one can pinpoint him as any one particular Jew. He allows us to live in different religious spaces simultaneously because he proves that that is part of the vocation of being Jews.

SHAI HELD

He was raised to be a Hasidic rebbe, a master, a spiritual teacher. And I have often thought that that upbringing is part of what allowed him to feel a tremendous amount of authority. If you think about someone who comes to a country as an immigrant, English is his fourth language, you can imagine some like that feeling like a guest, nervous about speaking up. And yet Heschel I think had a sense of himself as Jewish royalty, which meant he was not only permitted but obligated to speak with the force of the entirety of the Jewish tradition to the pressing issues of his time.

MARTIN BUBER

BENJAMIN SAX

So Martin Buber, very similar to Heschel, comes out of an Eastern European Jewish life and makes his way into a German Jewish context. He's very well known for developing a philosophy called the "I and Thou" in which we are in dialogue with one another in our everyday relationships. And sometimes in our relationships we have utilitarian purposes, what he calls an

“I/it”. When I go to the grocery store and say hello to the person who is ringing up my food, we have a very simple utilitarian purpose. But then there are conversations with people that enter into the Thou, into something else, something that is timeless, something that you are not controlling it or are being controlled by it. And for Buber, it’s sometimes in these moments that you get a glimpse of the eternal, what we might call the “Eternal Thou.”

STATE OF ISRAEL

CORNEL WEST

He was very much in solidarity with the state of Israel, but he had his critiques. There’s a famous story of Heschel giving his lecture after the vicious attack on Arabs [by Jews], killing women and children. He looks up, tears in his eyes, and just walks out of the classroom after saying, ‘You all know what happened. We Jews have done what we are opposing others to do’. So, even as a Zionist, he knew it had to be a Zionism that did not violate the humanity and rights of others.

SUSANNAH HESCHEL

I think my father felt that the establishment of Israel was a miracle, something extraordinary. And of course every Jew at that point, 1948, is feeling, “If only this had happened sooner. Look who we could have saved, so many people.” So there is that feeling of the tragedy as well as celebration. It is very clear that there has to be a state of Israel, my father had no question about it, no doubt about it. And at the same time he would go to Israel to lecture and he would talk about the importance of retaining a sense of what it means to be Jewish. This is a Jewish state, to be Jewish isn’t just to be born a Jew. There’s more than that.

ARNOLD EISEN on Heschel and the Holocaust

Heschel did not want Jews to simply remember the Holocaust, to remember what happened. Heschel wanted Jews in America to take over the Judaism of those generations. To make it live here so it’s not irrelevant, oppressive, insipid and dull. It’s not an heirloom, as he said; it has to be a living fountain and not an heirloom. That I think is his calling.

VII. *The Sabbath*

One of Abraham Joshua Heschel's most enduring works is a short volume published in 1951 called *The Sabbath*. In that book, Heschel reflects on the importance of Sabbath-keeping as a way of reconnecting with God, family, and community; of honoring God's gift of rest and renewal; of reorientation and stepping out of the rush of ordinary time; and of practicing important rituals and traditions that reinforce religious and cultural identities. Sabbath-keeping is especially important in the Hasidic tradition from which Heschel descended, an acknowledgement of God's gift of creation and the wonder of it. In *The Sabbath*, Heschel writes of Judaism itself as "a *religion of time* aiming at *the sanctification of time*." Rather than focusing on holy spaces, Heschel suggests that, by insisting on the demarcation between ordinary time and sacred time, Jewish ritual "may be characterized as . . . [an] *architecture of time*." Christianity may have its magnificent churches and Islam its grand mosques, but for Jews, Heschel asserts that "[t]he Sabbaths are our great cathedrals"---the times when we pause, pray, worship, and reorient ourselves to God, one another, and creation.

Questions to Consider:

1. What do you think Heschel means when he suggests that Judaism is a "religion in time" rather than of space? Here is a quote to consider:

"The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to *holiness in time*. It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the creation of the world" (*The Sabbath*, 10).

2. Rabbi Sharon Brous suggests that "it is actually *Shabbat*, the experience of the Sabbath, that has kept the Jewish people alive over the course of thousands of years through all kinds of struggle." What do you think she means by this? How might Sabbath-keeping have helped Jews to maintain their unique identity and to survive diaspora and persecution over the centuries? Would secular Jews disagree with this assessment?

3. Arnold Eisen of the Jewish Theological Seminary suggests that Sabbath-keeping has helped American Jews maintain their cultural and religious identities over against the powerful forces of assimilation. Eisen suggests that part of Heschel's message to readers of *The Sabbath* is, "Your space is now Gentile space [America], but your time can be Jewish time. You can make a place in your life that is sacred, that is going to enable you to be fully Jewish in the larger society. . . ."

Do you agree with Eisen's assessment? Has Sabbath-keeping enabled American Jews to retain a unique identity within the larger, diverse American culture?

4. Scholar Benjamin Sax asserts that, “When you live in a world in which you look forward to a Sabbath day every week, it gives you hope, it gives you some sort of redemption.” Do you practice a Sabbath day in your tradition (whether Jewish or not)? Do you agree with Sax’s assessment that Sabbath-keeping offers a sense of hope or redemption? Why or why not? What difference might it make if you did practice a Sabbath day each week, as Heschel suggests?

5. In Jewish tradition and many others, Sabbath-keeping is associated with specific and recurring rituals and practices that help to reinforce its meaning and resonance. What are some of the important rituals that Heschel and his family practiced? If you practice Sabbath-keeping in your own tradition, what rituals do you associate with it? How does the practice of specific rituals and traditions help to make the Sabbath “eternal” as Heschel suggests it is?

6. Consider Heschel’s assertion in *The Sabbath* that “[t]he Jewish contribution to the idea of love is the conception of love of the Sabbath, the love of a day, of spirit in the form of time” (16). What do you think he means by this? How might the Jewish love of the Sabbath be a contribution to an understanding of love itself?

7. In the film, Christian theologian Walter Brueggemann suggests that, in *The Sabbath*, Heschel’s “articulation helped us see that Sabbath is intensely Jewish, but then, it’s not Jewish at all, it’s human. . . . “ Is the idea of Sabbath and of Sabbath-keeping something that could or does have universal application? Could it apply to everyone, regardless of tradition? What does Sabbath mean in your tradition?

TIME NOT SPACE

SHARON BROUS

There's a great Jewish teaching that as much as the Jewish people have kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has really kept the Jewish people. That part of the reason that the Jewish people have been able to sustain ourselves over the course of thousands of years of often very fraught and rigorous history is because we've had the Sabbath. And the way that the Sabbath was preserved was in many ways through very carefully constructed prohibitions and obligations. What we are not allowed to do and what we are called to do during those days.

And what Abraham Joshua Heschel did, without denying any of that structural, foundational piece of Shabbat, was say just remember that it's not only about the prohibitions, it not about what you're not allowed to do, it's about the space that you create in your life when you don't do those things.

SUSANNAH HESCHEL

I think for my father the Sabbath was central course and he felt civilization will perish not for want of information but for want of appreciation. And the Sabbath is every week a day to remember how to appreciate, how to appreciate life, our lives, our families, our community. To appreciate the Torah, to appreciate also what it means to have an atmosphere that we create, what it means to make a period of time holy.

MICHAEL LERNER

And what I say as a rabbi now is anybody who will try Shabbat for 25 hours each week for 6 months will never want to give it up. It's self-validating and really is something that anybody in the world, regardless of your religion if you just follow the rules of Shabbat for one 25 hour period and did that for a few months, you would have such a beautiful spiritual experience that you'd never want to give it up.

JAMES RUDIN

Judaism is a religion of time, not space, you don't need big spaces, you need to sense of time and he is really talking about the Sabbath. Making that special, making that seventh day mean something. We're using your life in a special way, a sense of time. Because as we all know, the only thing we have is time and that runs out for all of us. So Heschel was asking, what are you going to do with your time? What is Judaism going to do with time? What are religions going to do with time? Are you going to waste it, trivialize it, make it frivolous, or are you going to use the time for enhancement, for strength, so forth. So that's a brilliant concept.

MICHAEL LERNER

One of the key insights that he put forward was that, to be in real connection to God was to be in awe and wonder and radical amazement at the universe that God created and to celebrate that on the Sabbath but also in all kinds of ways that the Jewish commandments were telling us to do. They were all vehicles to get you into the place where you could see the beauty of this universe

and the awesomeness of this universe and to stand in wonder and, as he puts it, “radical amazement.”

BENJAMIN SAX

The Sabbath is very popular among many liberal-leaning Jewish community precisely because it takes issue with technological time, in that we are working too much, technology is taking over aspects of our life at too great a speed for us to catch up. And here's Heschel taking a traditional concept and saying that we have a moral and theological responsibility to stop, to take a pause once a week, to reconnect to our families, to reconnect to our communities, to reconnect to God. No matter how fast society is moving, no matter how great technological advancements are, we need to pause. And that was something that connected with a lot of liberal Jews in a way that you couldn't have anticipated because he's using a traditionalist Jewish motif to address a secular, contemporary problem in a compelling way.

ARNOLD EISEN

Heschel and a bunch of other Jewish thinkers have the task of adjusting people to America and showing them that you can be a good American, but you can also retain the fullness of your Jewish identity. Maybe not in the same way as in the past, but you can do it here. So, when Heschel makes his famous statement in the Sabbath about building a palace in time and argues that Jews sanctify time and not space, what he's doing sociologically, politically, is saying, okay your space is now the United States, your space is no longer the shtetl. You're no longer living in an integrated Hasidic community in Warsaw. Your space is now Gentile space, but your time can be Jewish time. You can make this a place in your life that is sacred, that is going to enable you to be fully Jewish even in the larger society. And that's, I think, the first and fundamental reason for his appeal, that's what Jews needed to hear and that's what he gave.