

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?