

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.

CORNEL WEST , on 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 really, kind of 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. The notion that someone – 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

Of course 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 coming to give 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 the state 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 at the same time. 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.