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Award-winning New Documentary *SPIRITUAL AUDACITY* Tells the Story of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a Prophetic Voice for Justice in the 20th Century

Airing on Public Television stations beginning May 2021 for Jewish American Heritage Month

Abraham Joshua Heschel, a Polish-born rabbi who escaped to the United States from Nazi Germany and became one of the most influential public theologians and civil rights activists of the twentieth century, is the subject of the latest award-winning documentary by Martin Doblmeier and Journey Films: *SPIRITUAL AUDACITY: The Abraham Joshua Heschel Story*. The film will begin airing on Public Television stations in May in celebration of Jewish American Heritage Month, which is a project of the National Museum of American Jewish History.

A scholar of the Hebrew prophets, Heschel, like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos, dared to speak truth to power. For over three decades, his writing, preaching, and activism were inspired by the prophets' vision of a God who seeks to partner with humanity. "Heschel understood that when Amos talked about, 'Let justice roll down like water,' that was not just for Israel, that was for nations all around the world," says Cornel West, one of the theologians, activists, and historians interviewed for the film.

"Abraham Heschel is not simply a figure from history but someone with wisdom and conviction that seems more relevant than ever," says Doblmeier. "Our society is deeply divided—injustice on one side, anger and vitriol on the other. Heschel understood well the price of indifference and he refused to stand on the sidelines. But the path to change that he shared with Martin Luther King, Jr was to awaken the conscience of the American people through discourse and non-violence."

One of Heschel's oft-quoted sayings is: "Morally speaking, there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings. Indifference to evil is worse than evil itself, [and]...in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible." Doblmeier illustrates Heschel's commitment to moral issues, justice, and interfaith dialogue through key events such as:

- **The March on Selma:** Heschel joined Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., at the head of the Selma March in 1965. Civil rights leader Andrew Young recalls, "[Heschel] was the authority on the prophets but on this occasion, HE WAS the prophet. And it was almost like you had somebody who walked out of the Old Testament and got in the front of the line."
- **Vietnam War Protests:** Heschel co-chaired a nationwide effort of clergy and laypeople calling for an end to the war. "No triumph is worth the terror which we commit in that land," he said. "People came to see my father from the Israeli Embassy and said you should be quiet about Vietnam," Susannah Heschel says. "You'll endanger US support for Israel. My father wouldn't be quiet, no one could silence him."
- **Jewish-Catholic relations:** Heschel played a key role in drafting the landmark Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions) and was instrumental in removing language about "deicide" and proselytizing Jews. "If I were asked either to convert or to die in Auschwitz, I'd rather go to Auschwitz," he said.

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- **Interfaith pioneer:** Heschel was the first non-Christian visiting professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York where towering theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich taught. In his opening lecture “*No Religion is an Island*” Heschel said: “On what basis do we people of different religious commitment meet one another? First of all we meet as human beings....to meet a human being is an opportunity to sense the image of God, the presence of God. The Lord said to Moses: ‘Where ever you see the trace of man, there I stand before you.’”

Born in Warsaw in 1907, Heschel was descended from a rabbinic dynasty. He studied at the University of Berlin and began doctoral work on a study of the Hebrew prophets, but in 1938, with the Nazis in power, he was arrested and deported. Heschel emigrated to the US in 1940 on a visa secured by the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. His mother and three sisters died in the Holocaust.

Heschel died in December, 1972 at the age of 65. “His commitment to embody the covenant between God and humanity to renew the world remains an inspiration for Jews and Non-Jews alike,” says filmmaker Doblmeier.

The film’s title, *SPIRITUAL AUDACITY* comes from Heschel’s response to President John F. Kennedy, who invited him to a White House conference on race and religion, intended to derail a planned march on Washington. Susannah Heschel recalls her father’s response, sent by telegram: “I propose that you, Mr. President, declare a state of moral emergency. The hour calls for moral grandeur and spiritual audacity.”

The film features archival photographs, film and audio of Heschel, plus interviews with his daughter Susannah and an eminent cast of rabbis, theologians, scholars, historians, and civil rights leaders, including Pulitzer-prize winning historian Taylor Branch, Rabbi Sharon Brous, celebrated Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann, Arnold Eisen, Shai Held, activist Michael Lerner, Civil Rights leaders Jesse Jackson, Andrew Young and the late Rep. John Lewis, James Rudin, Benjamin Sax, public theologian Cornel West and others. It is the fourth film in Doblmeier’s *Prophetic Voices* series. The other films profile Dorothy Day, Howard Thurman, and Reinhold Niebuhr.

SPIRITUAL AUDACITY recently won the Wilbur Award for Best Documentary in the category of Films and Video, the fifth such award for Journey Films. The Wilber Award has been given annually since 1949 by the Religion Communicators Council to honor the best work in a wide array of media.

ABOUT JOURNEY FILMS

Journey Films was founded in 1983 by award-winning filmmaker Martin Doblmeier as a television and film production company specializing in religion, faith and spirituality. Journey Films has produced more than 30 documentary films that have aired on PBS, ABC, NBC, the BBC and on broadcast outlets around the world, including *BONHOEFFER*, *The Power of Forgiveness*, *An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story*, and most recently, *Backs Against the Wall: The Howard Thurman Story*. Journey’s films have been translated into more than a dozen languages. In all, Journey Films have won three regional Emmy Awards, eight Gabriel Awards for the nation’s best film on a topic of religion, three Gold Awards at the US International Film and Television Festival, the Sun Valley Film Festival and many others.

ABOUT MARTIN DOBLMEIER

Martin holds degrees in Religious Studies, Broadcast Journalism and three honorary degrees in Fine Arts and Humane Letters. Since 1984 he has produced and directed more than 30 films focused on religion, faith and spirituality. Martin combines a lifelong interest in religion with a passion for storytelling. Over the years he has traveled on location to more than forty countries to profile numerous religious leaders, spiritual communities, heads of state and Nobel Laureates. His films explore how belief can lead individuals to extraordinary acts, and how spirituality creates and sustains communities.

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