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Abraham Joshua Heschel: Witness to God in Word and Deed

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John C. Merkle

Abstract

“There are no proofs for the existence of the God of Abraham,” said Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972). “There are only witnesses.” For countless Jews and Christians, Heschel was, in both his words and his deeds, one of the preeminent witnesses to God in the twentieth century. To commemorate the centennial year of his birth, this article presents of a brief overview of Heschel’s inspiring life and works in the service of God.

KEYWORDS: Heschel, Jewish theology, Hasidism, God

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“Here was a man for whom God was real,” said renowned Protestant theologian Robert McAfee Brown about Abraham Joshua Heschel. “It is not very often these days that one finds a person who communicates this reality, not even among theologians.”¹ Heschel communicated this reality of God through both words and deeds. After his death on December 23, 1972, one of his students was moved to say: “It was the love of God that was personified in him. The harp of this *zaddik’s* [righteous man’s] heart played day and night the echo of God’s message.”² Another scholar referred to Heschel’s books as “the domain of written love, of a love that weaves sentences to celebrate God.”³

Born in Warsaw in 1907, Abraham Joshua Heschel was the descendent, on both paternal and maternal sides of his family, of long lines of rabbis and scholars within the Jewish mystical movement known as Hasidism. Forged in Eastern Europe during the eighteenth century in response to the teaching of Reb Israel ben Eliezer (c. 1690-1760), known as the Baal Shem Tov (Master of the Good Name), Hasidism emphasizes the presence of God in daily life and joy as a way of experiencing God.

Heschel grew up in an atmosphere of genuine Hasidic piety and learning, nurtured by a great wealth of Hasidic traditions and tales. In the introduction to his last book, *A Passion for Truth*, Heschel writes: “The earliest fascination I can recall is associated with the Baal Shem, whose parables

disclosed some the first insights I gained as a child.”⁴ But Heschel was also profoundly influenced by the only Hasidic leader to challenge teachings of the Baal Shem: Reb Menahem Mendl of Kotzk (1787-1859), known as the Kotzker Rebbe (an Hasidic leader whose position is based on heredity or charisma). In many ways, the Kotzker was the antithesis of the Baal Shem, and their dual influence upon the young Heschel perhaps accounts for much of the polarity and paradox in Heschel’s later writings. The Baal Shem found God everywhere and rejoiced in God’s presence. The Kotzker was dreadfully aware of God’s absence and stormed the heavens, accosting God for permitting evil to exist in the world. The Baal Shem inspired joy and ecstasy, the Kotzker fear and trembling.

Reflecting upon the influence of both the Baal Shem and the Kotzker on his life, Heschel writes: “I was taught about inexhaustible mines of meaning by the Baal Shem; from the Kotzker I learned to detect immense mountains of absurdity standing in the way. The one taught me song, the other – silence. The one reminded me there could be a Heaven on earth; the other shocked me into discovering Hell in the alleged Heavenly places in our world.”⁵

“I must admit,” says Heschel, “that during my entire life I struggled between being a hasid of the way of the Baal Shem or the way of the Kotzker Rebbe.”⁶ Perhaps combining the spirits of two such divergent masters in his

¹ Robert McAfee Brown, “Abraham Heschel: A Passion for Sincerity,” *Christianity and Crisis* (December 10, 1973): 257-258.

² Jacob Y. Teshima, “My Memory of Professor Abraham Joshua Heschel,” *Conservative Judaism* (Fall 1973): 80.

³ Edward K. Kaplan, “Form and Content in Abraham J. Heschel’s Poetic Style,” *Central Conference of American Rabbis* (April 1971): 29.

⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *A Passion for Truth* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1973), xiv.

⁵ *Ibid.*, xiv.

⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Kotzk: In gerangl far emesdikeit* (Kotzk: The Struggle for Integrity), Yiddish, 2 vols. (Tel-Aviv: Hamenora Publishing House, 1973), 10. This quotation was translated and cited by Harold Kasimow, *The Divine-Human Encounter: A Study of Abraham Joshua Heschel* (Washington D.C.: University Press of America, 1979), 3.

own spirit largely accounts for the depth and breadth of insights found in Heschel's writings. Perhaps it was because Heschel never allowed either the Baal Shem or the Kotzker to prevail one over the other as his guide that Heschel's depictions of human existence and Jewish faith are so penetrating and complete. In an interview about fourteen months before his death, Heschel expressed his belief that the principle of polarity is essential to Judaism and he revealed that he consciously decided that it was his task "to find some kind of calculus by which to establish a polarity of the Kotzker and the Baal Shem – or of Judaism altogether."⁷

While Heschel's religious imagination and sensitivity were nurtured by tales and teachings of Hasidic masters, most of his youthful years were devoted to classical Jewish learning, the study of Bible and Talmud (The Mishnah, the first comprehensive post-biblical book of Jewish law, formulated about 200 C.E., plus commentaries on the Mishnah, compiled from the third to the seventh centuries), and the study of the medieval Jewish mystical tradition known as Kabbalah. But Heschel achieved in his youth not only "knowledge of the Jewish religious heritage" but also "understanding for the realness of the spirit and for the holy dimension of all existence," which "was not primarily the result of book learning but the cumulative effect of life lived among people who 'were sure that everything hinted at something transcendent'; that the presence of God was a daily experience and the sanctification of life a daily task."⁸

⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, quoted from an interview with Jack D. Spiro held in October 1971, in Jack D. Spiro, "Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel: An Appreciation," *Religious Education* (March-April 1973), 220.

⁸ Fritz A. Rothschild, "Introduction," in *Between God and Man: An Interpretation of Judaism from the Writings of Abraham J. Heschel*, ed. Fritz A. Rothschild (New York: The Free Press, 1959), 7-8. Rothschild's statement includes a quotation from Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Earth Is the Lord's: the Inner World of the Jew in East Europe* (New York: Henry Schuman, 1950), 56.

But even if book learning was not the primary source of his religious understanding, nevertheless "by age thirteen, Heschel mastered the texts qualifying him to become a practicing rabbi," reports his biographer Edward K. Kaplan.⁹ Advised to wait until he achieved even greater mastery of rabbinic sources, "Heschel was about sixteen years old when he was ordained" by one of his teachers, a prominent member of the Warsaw Rabbinical Council.¹⁰ But the teenage rabbi longed for a secular education to complement his religious one, and to that end at age eighteen he moved to Vilna where for two years he matriculated at a secular Yiddish-language *gymnasium*, broadening his education and developing his literary skills in preparation for university studies.

In April 1928 Heschel enrolled in the University of Berlin, where he earned his doctorate in philosophy in 1935. His doctoral dissertation on prophetic consciousness, published as *Die Prophetie* (On Prophecy) in 1936, forms the basis of the latter part of his monumental book *The Prophets*, published in 1962. The main themes of Heschel's dissertation and of his later book on the prophets are divine pathos – God's being affected by human beings even to the point of suffering – and human sympathy for and identification with divine pathos.

The religious philosophy that Heschel would develop throughout his lifetime began to take shape in his dissertation. The title of his major work of religious philosophy, *God in Search of Man*, published in 1955, expresses what Heschel considered to be the most fundamental insight of prophetic and rabbinic Judaism, that

⁹ Edward K. Kaplan and Samuel H. Dresner, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Prophetic Witness* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 47.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

God takes the initiative in the divine-human relationship, reflecting God's loving concern for human beings. By basing his philosophy on the experience of God's concern, and on the insight that this concern means that God is moved by the plight and the deeds of human beings, "Heschel has propounded a truly revolutionary doctrine, challenging the whole venerable tradition of Jewish and Christian metaphysical theology."¹¹ God, as the Supreme Subject in search of human beings, as One who is compassionate toward them, affected by them, is not the Unmoved Mover of classical metaphysical theology, but is, in Fritz Rothschild's apt expression, the Most Moved Mover of biblical consciousness. It is this consciousness of God that forms the foundation of Heschel's religious thought, and it is the explication of this consciousness that Heschel regarded as the "major effort" of his lifework.¹²

While Heschel's philosophical argument for the pathos of God challenges the tradition of classical metaphysical theology, as Rothschild rightly claims, it is not meant to challenge traditional Jewish understandings of God. To the contrary, as Heschel's daughter, Susannah Heschel, points out: "My father bases his understanding of divine pathos on a long, deep tradition within Judaism, most prominent in kabbalistic and Hasidic writings, but also found in the heart of rabbinic Judaism."¹³ Heschel was convinced that biblical and post-biblical Jewish references to God being affected by creatures, even to the point of suffering with them, make more theological or metaphysical sense than the standard

claim of classical Greek-inspired metaphysical theology that God is unmoved by the plight of creatures. Heschel's philosophical theology, unlike classical metaphysical theology, was born not of abstraction from human experience but of an analysis of it, particularly an analysis of the experience of the biblical prophets and pious Jews down through the ages. A remote and apathetic God would have struck them "with a sense, not of dignity and grandeur, but rather of poverty and emptiness."¹⁴

While pursuing doctoral studies and writing his dissertation in German, Heschel also somehow found time to write poetry in his native Yiddish, and the major themes that he would work out philosophically are poignantly expressed in some of his earliest poems, such as "God follows me everywhere" and "I and You," both published in 1929. The former clearly anticipates *God in Search of Man*, and the latter is obviously, though implicitly, an answer to Martin Buber's famous book *I and Thou*, published six years earlier, in which the human "I" seeks and dialogues with the divine "Thou." In three of the five stanzas, including the first stanza, of Heschel's "I and You," God is the "I." And God's relationship to the human "You" is not merely a matter of dialogue but of indwelling – and pathos: "I live in Me and in you. / Through your lips goes a word from Me to Me, / from your eyes drips a tear – its source in Me." The human response is full of sympathy for the God who dwells within: "When a need pains You, alarm me! / When You miss a human being / tear open my door! / You live in Yourself, You live in me."¹⁵ Here, in these lines, is the preeminent

¹¹ Fritz A. Rothschild, "Architect and Herald of a New Theology," *America* (March 10, 1973), 211.

¹² Abraham J. Heschel, "Teaching Jewish Theology in the Solomon Schechter Day School," *The Synagogue School* (Fall 1969), 7.

¹³ Susannah Heschel, "Introduction," in Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1996), xxii.

¹⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 258-259.

¹⁵ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Ineffable Name of God: Man*, (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005), 31. This book is a reprinting of Heschel's book of Yiddish poems, *Der Shem Hameforash: Mentsh* (Warsaw: Indzi Publishing House, 1933) and a translation by

philosopher-poet of divine-human communion, sharing an intimacy he knew and an insight he cultivated from his Warsaw days before the dawning of this poem until his death in New York some forty-three years after its publication. Here in these two poems is the prophetic mystic who from his earliest years through his last knew that God longs for the attention of those – all of us – in whom God lives.

But, for Heschel, more than God longs for the attention of human beings, God wants human beings to attend to each other. This theme, recurrent in many of Heschel's Yiddish poems, is expressed boldly in these lines of one titled "God and Man": "Not for Your own sake do You want sacrificial gifts; / only for those disappointed in Your love. / . . . Blasphemy pains You less / than people's despair. / He who blasphemes people, the world – / shames You, Almighty; / He who loves people – / brings joy to You, Holy One."¹⁶

The two poems here quoted are among sixty-six that constitute Heschel's first book, *Der Shem Hameforash: Mentsh* (The Ineffable Name of God: Man), published in 1933 while he was in the final stages of writing his doctoral dissertation. Throughout his life, Heschel was both a scholar and a poet. Most of his scholarly works are cast in a poetic prose that signifies the inseparability, at least for him, of theology and intense spiritual feeling. That the publication of his book of poems occurred during the time of his doctoral studies signaled what was to come: scholarly works as things of beauty – and of soul.

While attending the university, Heschel also studied at Berlin's Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums

Morton M. Leifman of those poems, with an introduction by Edward K. Kaplan.

¹⁶ Ibid., 45.

(Academy of Scientific Jewish Scholarship), a seminary of Germany's Liberal Judaism, where he received a second rabbinic ordination in 1934. Thus, he not only was complementing his religious learning with a secular education; he also was complementing his traditional Hasidic education with a modern, historical-critical approach to Judaism. This undoubtedly helped Heschel enrich and broaden his already profound understanding of Judaism, and it prepared him well to communicate effectively throughout his life with different segments of the Jewish community. "Though himself eschewing labels, identifying wholly with none of these schools [in the world of Judaism], and all the while holding his own views, Heschel established good relations with each of the factions, since he believed each represented, in greater or lesser measure, an affirmation of Jewish life. Heschel's breadth expressed the quality of his *'ahavat yisra'el* (love of Israel)."¹⁷

In 1934 Heschel assumed his first teaching position as an instructor in Talmud at the Berlin Hochschule from which he had just graduated. In 1935 the publication of his biography of Maimonides (1135-1204), the greatest of medieval Jewish scholars, "established his reputation as a fine scholar, a gifted and imaginative writer, and a master of German prose."¹⁸ "Heschel's vivid life of the Rambam (as Maimonides is also known) spoke to Jews who had to live in Nazi Germany deprived of their religious culture" as he

¹⁷ Samuel H. Dresner, "Introduction: Heschel as a Hasidic Scholar," in Abraham J. Heschel, *The Circle of the Baal Shem Tov: Studies in Hasidism*, edited by Samuel H. Dresner (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), viii.

¹⁸ Fritz A. Rothschild, "Introduction," *Between God and Man*, 8. Nearly five decades after its publication in German, Heschel's biography of Maimonides was published in English: Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Maimonides: A Biography*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1982).

conveyed Maimonides' goal "to make his God-consciousness available to everyone, to sanctify the everyday."¹⁹ In 1936 Heschel published a series of articles under the general title "Personalities of Jewish History" in a popular Berlin Jewish newspaper. Later described as acts of "spiritual resistance to the Nazis," these biographical sketches were designed to implicitly address "the situation of Jews in Germany" and to "hearten readers with a sense of divine purpose."²⁰

Continuing his attempt to uplift German Jews through biographical writing in a time of extreme crisis, the next year Heschel published a short book on the great Portuguese Jewish philosopher Don Isaac Abravanel (1437-1509) to commemorate the five-hundredth anniversary of his birth. Heschel was convinced that emulating the loyalty to God displayed by Abravanel could strengthen German Jews who experienced persecution and faced exile not unlike the Portuguese and Spanish Jews of the late fifteenth century. "Abravanel's destiny offered a timeless guide to the present, as stated by the author's [Heschel's] italicized editorial comment: '*The Jewish question is a question of God to us.*'"²¹

Early in 1937, the same year his biography of Abravanel appeared, Heschel accepted the invitation of Martin Buber (1878-1965), Europe's most famous Jewish philosopher, to join the faculty of the Judische Lehrhaus, founded by another renowned Jewish philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929), in Frankfurt-am-Maim. There Heschel led seminars, directed education activities, and gave public lectures until late October 1938, when he was deported by

¹⁹ Edward K. Kaplan, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Prophetic Witness*, 202 and 206.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 236.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 252.

the Nazis. "During the nineteen months he lived in Frankfurt, Heschel announced his theology of history – and became the witness to the living God he remained throughout his life."²²

Heschel was one of thousands of Polish Jews being sent back to their native country. But when the trains carrying them reached the border, Polish authorities refused to let them proceed home. But after several days in a detention camp, Heschel was permitted to return to Warsaw where, within a few weeks of his arrival, he was hired as a substitute teacher of Bible and Jewish philosophy at the Warsaw Institute of Jewish Science for the remainder of the academic year. In April 1939 he received a life-saving invitation to join the faculty of Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Ohio. Three months later, just six weeks before the Nazi invasion of Poland, Heschel left Warsaw for London, where he would spend nearly a year before assuming his new academic post in the United States.

Heschel never forgot the horror of his last months in Germany and Poland. Twenty-five years later, upon assuming the Harry Emerson Fosdick Visiting Professorship at Union Theological Seminary in New York, he referred to himself as "a brand plucked from the fire of an altar of Satan on which millions of human lives were exterminated to evil's greater glory, and on which so much else was consumed: the divine image of so many human beings, many people's faith in the God of justice and compassion, and much of the secret and power of attachment to the Bible bred and cherished in the hearts of men for nearly two thousand years."²³ He was thirty-three years old when he came to the United States where he lived for almost another thirty-three

²² *Ibid.*, 257.

²³ Abraham J. Heschel, "No Religion Is an Island," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* (January 1966), 117.

years until his death in 1972. During this second half of his life he became for many what the great Reinhold Niebuhr called him, “the most authentic prophet of religious life in our culture,”²⁴ as he consistently defended the divine image of all human beings, fostered faith in the God of justice and compassion, and inspired attachment of the Bible.

From 1940 until 1945 Heschel served as Associate Professor of Philosophy and Rabbinics at Hebrew Union College. While there he continued the study of medieval Jewish philosophers that he had begun in Berlin and wrote his first book in English, *The Quest for Certainty in Saadia’s Philosophy*. Published in 1944, this work is a penetrating study of the major questions explored by the father of medieval Jewish philosophy – questions such as the meaning of truth, the sources of religious knowledge, revelation and reason, doubt and faith, with which Heschel continued to grapple throughout the course of his life and to which he offered his own distinctive replies. What he said of Saadia Gaon may be said of Heschel himself: “He penetrated below the deep mines of Bible and Talmud, where he had unearthed a wealth of wisdom and learning in order to ascertain what lay in the substratum.”²⁵

Heschel remained forever grateful to those at Hebrew Union College who had secured his exodus from Poland, but while there he became increasingly aware of the disharmony between his approach to Judaism and the mission of the college. So in 1945, the same year he became a citizen of the United States, Heschel resigned his position at Hebrew Union and joined the faculty at Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York, where he subsequently became

²⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, quoted by Byron Sherwin, “Abraham Joshua Heschel,” *The Torch* (Spring 1969): 7.

²⁵ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Quest for Certainty in Saadia’s Philosophy* (New York: Philip Feldheim, 1944), 2.

Professor of Jewish Ethics and Mysticism and taught until the time of his death in 1972.

In 1946 Heschel married Sylvia Straus, a gifted pianist from Cleveland, Ohio, whom he had met while teaching in Cincinnati. Perhaps it was his marriage to a musician that moved Heschel, whose own speaking and writing had a melodious quality, to make the following observation: “The shattering experience of music has been a challenge to my thinking on ultimate issues. . . . Music leads to the threshold of repentance, of unbearable realization of our own vanity and frailty and of the terrible relevance of God. I would define myself as a person who has been smitten by music.”²⁶ Together with their one daughter, Susannah, the Heschels made their home on Riverside Drive, several blocks from the seminary where he taught.

During his tenure at Jewish Theological Seminary, Heschel lectured widely throughout the United States and beyond and he served as a visiting professor at several universities. During the 1965-1966 academic year he was the first Jewish theologian to hold a visiting professorship at Union Theological Seminary in New York, located just across the street from Jewish Theological Seminary. At Union, Heschel drew more students to his classes than any other visiting professor in the school’s history. But it was not only the students who came to him; he also reached out to them. According to J. A. Sanders, a prominent professor at Union, “Heschel made himself available to students and colleagues in ways that put the rest of the faculty to shame. Like the God of whom he spoke so warmly, Heschel was always there.”²⁷

²⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), 246.

²⁷ J. A. Sanders, “An Apostle to the Gentiles,” *Conservative Judaism* (Fall 1973): 62.

All the while he was teaching, Heschel also continued to be a prolific writer, and his writings became widely read, even outside academic circles. "Every new book by Heschel intrigued Jews searching for roads back toward Judaism," writes Moshe Starkman. "More than anyone else in our time, he helped the seeking Jews gain vision to see the *maor sheb'yahadut*, the bright and brilliant within Judaism."²⁸ But the influence of Heschel's books extends far beyond his Jewish audience. Explaining why Heschel's books and essays became "the devotional reading of myriads of non-Jews," renowned biblical scholar W. D. Davies writes: "Through his faith in the God beyond all mystery he ministered to our ultimate human need and, therefore, to us all. In his books and speeches, in which the cadences and rhythms and patterns of ancient synagogal prayers and sermons reverberate, . . . he called into being the emotions which he described, and summoned, not only Jews, but non-Jews also, to the depth of awe, wonder and mystery that life should evoke in all men."²⁹

Heschel's most influential books written after World War II are the ones he wrote in English: *The Earth Is the Lord's: The Inner World of the Jew in East Europe* (1950), an eloquent tribute to the people from whom Heschel learned to develop his own inner world as a Jew; *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (1951), a penetrating study of sanctity of time; *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (1951) and *God In Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (1955), profound explorations of the grounds for faith in God and ways of responding to God; *Man's Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism* (1954), a collection of essays containing what many people regard as the most

²⁸ Moshe Starkman, "Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Jewish Writer and Thinker," *Conservative Judaism* (Fall 1973): 75.

²⁹ W. D. Davies, "Conscience, Scholar, Witness, *America* (March 10, 1973),\": 215.

penetrating analysis of prayer written in twentieth century America; *The Prophets* (1962), a monumental study that greatly expands the work on the prophets that he had done for his doctoral dissertation; *Who Is Man?* (1965), a cogent defense of the transcendent dignity of being human; *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (1966), a collection of twenty essays dealing with issues such as race relations, medical care, the plight of the elderly, interfaith relations, and religious education; *Israel: An Echo of Eternity* (1968), an elegant explanation of the significance that Israel holds for Jews everywhere; and *A Passion for Truth* (1973), a remarkable comparative study of the Baal Shem Tov, the Kotzker Rebbe, and Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard. Along with these widely read books he wrote in English, Heschel also wrote major works in Yiddish and Hebrew: the two-volume Yiddish work *Kotzk: In gerangl far emesdikeit* (1973) on the Kotzker Rebbe's passion for integrity; and the three-volume Hebrew work *Torah min ha-šamayim be-ispaklaryah shel ha-dorot* (volume 1, 1962; volume 2, 1965; volume 3, 1992), exploring major issues of revelation according to different strands of rabbinic theology, translated into English by Gordon Tucker and Leonard Levin and recently published in one massive volume as *Heavenly Torah as Refracted Through the Generations* (2005).

Heschel believed that "music is the soul of language" and that "a sentence without a tone, without a musical quality is like a body without a soul."³⁰ He made sure that the language he employed and the literary corpus he produced was full of soul. "His works are like enchanted forests," writes Fritz Rothschild. "If only we take the effort to enter them, we shall find them both enchanted and enchanting."³¹ As such, Heschel's writings evoke the religious sensitivity,

³⁰ *A Passion for Truth*, 323.

³¹ Fritz A. Rothschild, "Architect and Herald of a New Theology," 211.

indeed the sense of God's presence, to which they bear witness.

These writings of Heschel's are genuinely religious because they reflect his authentic religious life: a harmony of prayer, study, and action. His action consisted primarily in the unsung ethical and religious deeds of a pious Jew, but he also took a public stand on a number of social issues. This began early in his life and was particularly evident in an anti-Nazi lecture he delivered in Germany in March 1938.³²

Nevertheless, it was only in the last decade of his life that Heschel emerged as a recognized ethical leader of national and international prominence. This began in 1963 when he delivered the keynote address at the National Conference on Religion and Race which led to widespread clergy participation in the great "march on Washington." He was passionate and persistent in his support of civil rights and in his condemnation of racism. He often appeared with Martin Luther King, Jr., and he walked by his side in the great Selma march of 1965.

Heschel also protested the American involvement in the Vietnam war. He co-authored *Vietnam: Crisis of Conscience* (1967) and he was a co-founder of Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam, a national interfaith organization that helped to bring and moral and religious implications of the Vietnam war to the attention of the American people. It was largely in connection with this organization that he spent an enormous amount of time and energy in the service of peace.

³² A later version of this address was published as "The Meaning of this War," *Hebrew Union College Bulletin* (March 1943): 1-2, 18; reprinted in Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man's Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), 147-151.

Heschel was also the first major Jewish figure to urge world Jewry to come to the aid of the Jews in the Soviet Union who were suffering what he called "spiritual genocide," and his efforts led to the formation of the American Conference on Soviet Jewry. "Early in the 1960s," writes Reuven Kimelman, "when Heschel was forging concern for Vietnam, he was simultaneously lighting the spark for one of the greatest protest movements of Jewish history – Soviet Jewry."³³

Heschel was also active and immensely influential in interfaith relations. Most noteworthy is the prominent role he assumed in the negotiations between Jewish organizations and the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church before and during the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). He was the most influential American Jewish delegate at the Council, encouraging church leaders to condemn antisemitism, to eliminate anti-Judaism from church teachings, to acknowledge the integrity and permanent preciousness of Judaism. Although the conciliar decree on interfaith relations, *Nostra Aetate*, did not fulfill Heschel's expectations, he acknowledged it as a landmark in the history of Catholic-Jewish relations.

Heschel also had far-reaching interfaith influence apart from formal interfaith dialogue. Through his writing, teaching, and public lecturing, he taught Jews and Christians to recognize the sanctity of each other's religion and he helped them to realize the mutual spiritual benefits of interfaith encounter. Living his last decade of life in the midst of an interfaith revolution he helped create, Heschel had the opportunity to reach the Christian world in ways unknown to Jews of previous generations. And while he was one of many Jewish religious thinkers of the twentieth century to

³³ Reuven Kimelman, "Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972)," *Response: A Contemporary Jewish Review* (Winter 1972-73): 18.

influence Christian thinking, he more than others fostered an enhanced appreciation of Judaism among Christians and, consequently, new ways of understanding Christianity vis-à-vis Judaism.³⁴

In the context of speaking of Heschel's influence on Christians, Robert McAfee Brown makes this personal testimony: "When I have been in his presence and have talked with him and have heard him pray, I have been moved to ask myself, 'What have I got to tell this man about God?' and thus far I have never found an answer. At this stage of Christian-Jewish dialogue I remain content to learn."³⁵ To have inspired an outstanding Christian theologian to such an extent that he felt he had nothing to tell Heschel about God, and was therefore "content to learn" from him, was for Heschel to perform a major feat for Judaism in relation to Christianity. One of the principal ways

by which Christian theologians have attempted to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity over Judaism has been to claim that the Christian view of God is superior to the Jewish view. But having led Christians into the grandeur of the Jewish tradition, Heschel has convinced many of them that Jewish understandings of God as they have developed through the centuries are every bit as profound as what Christian theologians usually have claimed can be attained only by means of Christian faith. Concerning Heschel's approach to God, the great philosopher Charles Hartshorne expresses the view of many Christians when he writes: "If there has been a theology whose supreme principle is divine love, this is it."³⁶

For Christians as well as for Jews, then, Abraham Joshua Heschel is a preeminent guide to the reality and the relevance of God.

³⁴ See John C. Merkle, "Abraham J. Heschel (1907-1972): Introduction," in *Jewish Perspectives on Christianity*, ed. Fritz A. Rothschild (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1990), 267-277.

³⁵ Robert McAfee Brown, "Abraham Heschel: A Passion for Sincerity," 257.

³⁶ Charles Hartshorne, in a letter to John C. Merkle (June 18, 1985).