



Abraham Joshua Heschel

Biography Timeline – **January 11, 1907**, born in Warsaw, Poland, the youngest of six children, to Rabbi Moshe Mordecai Heschel and Reizel Perlow Heschel, in a lineage of seven generations of famous Hasidic rabbis, on both his father's and mother's sides of his family tree, an ancestry including the Novominsker rebbe, Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezeritch and Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev; as a child he is considered a blessed genius, given his prodigious capacity for learning and insight, particularly regarding the Talmud; **1916**, his father dies of influenza; **1927**, successfully completes his examinations at the Yiddish-language Mathematical-Natural Science Gymnasium in Vilna; enters the University of Berlin and the Liberal Jewish research academy and rabbinical seminary, Higher Institute for Jewish Studies; **1933**, obtains doctorate from the University of Berlin; releases in Yiddish his first book, a collection of poems, *The Ineffable Name of God: Man*; while living in Berlin he witnesses Hitler's rise to power; **1934**, ordained as a rabbi; **1937**, appointed by Martin Buber as Buber's successor at Lehrhaus in Frankfurt; **October, 1938**, arrested by the Nazis and deported to Poland; teaches at Warsaw Institute for Jewish Studies; immigrates to England; **1940**, immigrates to the U.S. and begins 5-year stay at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati as associate professor of philosophy and rabbinics; **1945**, becomes professor of Jewish ethics and mysticism at Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City, where he remains until his death; **December 10, 1946**, marries Sylvia Straus, a concert pianist, in Los Angeles; from their union will come one daughter, Susannah Heschel, who later becomes a renowned scholar in Jewish-Christian relations and the history of anti-Semitism; **1950's**, writes his most formidable and important theological works; **1954**, receives Guggenheim Fellowship; **1962-1965**, serves as first officially recognized Jewish advisor for the Second Vatican Council, successfully urging the Roman Catholic Church to revise its liturgies and teachings that had been defamatory toward Jews; **January 14-17, 1963**, participates in the National Conference of Religion and Race held in Chicago, which energized the subsequent March on Washington later that summer; **March 21, 1965**, walks and demonstrates with Martin Luther King in the Selma to Montgomery march; **Fall 1965**, helps to co-found Clergy and Laity Concerned about the Vietnam War (CALCVW); participates with King, William Sloane Coffin, Jr., and other leaders in civil rights movement and peace endeavors throughout the United States; also serves as one of the strongest voices in the U.S. regarding the plight of Soviet Jewry; **April 4, 1967**, at a meeting of (CALCVW), speaks just after King, calling for an end to the Vietnam War; **June 1971**, delivers eulogy at Reinhold Niebuhr's funeral; **Shabbat, December 23, 1972**, dies in his sleep, on the Sabbath, which in Judaism is considered "a kiss from God."

In the 20th century few religious figures in Judaism loomed larger or had greater impact than Abraham Joshua Heschel. In his brief 65 years of life, spent on two continents, he combined the knowledge of a genius intellectual with the passion of a prophet and the lyricism of a poet. His scholarly work on the Hebrew prophets, his

emphasis on the importance of interfaith dialogue, his reveling in the joys and challenges of Hasidic mysticism, and his descriptions of the nature of authentic worship stand today as beacons of insight and inspiration to millions, both Jews and non-Jews. His activism on behalf of human rights for all people and his participation in the call for world peace make him an exemplar for current and future generations. His is a monumental legacy of magisterial importance.

From an early age, Heschel expressed an inclination toward the poetic. His very first book was, in fact, a collection of poems, published in Yiddish, in which he articulated many of the major themes of his scholarly endeavors and activist involvements.(1)

Heschel's life-long concern for others would compel him onto the world stage. Confronted by the barbarism of Hitler, he was changed forever to be attentive to the dynamics of societal change and global relations. Arm in arm with Martin Luther King, Jr., he marched for civil rights in the U.S. Understanding his activism and his spiritual practices to be in complete congruence, he said about his participation in the historic march in Selma, Alabama, "*My legs were praying.*" (2) Aghast at the carnage of Vietnam, he helped to organize Clergy and Laity Concerned About Vietnam. Consistently concerned about interfaith relations, he became a participant in the Second Vatican Council and helped to move the Roman Catholic Church away from its previous defamation of the Jews and toward a position of spiritual mutuality.

Heschel's grandest contributions were in his thinking, teaching, and writing about the fundamental dynamics of humanity's relationship with God. In Heschel's

thinking, all of life is holy and every human soul is precious. The proper response to such holiness and preciousness is awe, gratitude and reverence for the sheer gift of existence. Yet, equally important is the importuning by God for all of creation to be representative of God's presence in the world. Human beings are to abide in integrity and *"to live a life that would deserve and evoke an eternal Amen."* (3)

In Heschel's understanding of the intersection between the human and the divine, we are meant to be collaborators with the divine. (4) There is in God's very nature, in the very core of God's being, a *"divine pathos"*(5) which God extends to all creation, but first and foremost to human beings, who bear the imprint of God's image.

Faith begins then, for Heschel, in reverential awe. (6) As awe grows, faith takes hold, and then we are aware that our daily existence holds aspects of holiness in all of its dimensions. Common things become sacred. Common deeds of goodness and kindness become blessed occasions of God's revelation in the world. Daily piety becomes the preferred way to be fully alive. One's piety is expressed through worship, ritual, and prayer *and* through deeds of justice.

Prayer for Heschel is constituted by practice and devotion to an unwavering principle: *"Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy."* (7) Prayer is to be a daily, constant activity, empowered by the rigors of the rituals of one's faith, but also enhanced by personal attention given to the miraculous dimensions of everyday life, particularly in the public sphere.

Also for Heschel, prayer also affords us occasions to be shocked into responsible action in the face of misdeeds, crimes, prejudices, and atrocities committed within the

realm of the human family. Prayer is, for Heschel, “subversive,” in that it stimulates us “to overthrow and to ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, falsehood.” (8)

Premier in Heschel's writing and thinking is his grand vision of the importance of the Sabbath. The Sabbath is a “sanctuary in time” by which we become “attuned to holiness in time....to the mystery of creation.....” (9)

Praying with Abraham Joshua Heschel: Suggestions for Use

Day 1 Pray today that you will conduct your life over the next 24 hours in such ways that your actions, thoughts, and attitudes will “deserve and evoke an eternal Amen.”

Day 2 Give God thanks today for the caring and compassionate “divine pathos” which God extends to humanity, and especially to you.

Day 3 Pray today on three separate occasions – taking five minutes during each occasion – to attend simply, quietly, and with focused concentration on the miraculous dimensions in your home.

Day 4 Today, let your prayers be simple expressions of awe. Use the phrase, “Oh God, You are great!,” either silently and aloud, each time you encounter an event, a person, a scene, an idea or a notion that inspires awe within you.

Day 5 Heschel's epigram for his very first book reads “I prayed for wonders instead of happiness,/and You gave them to me.” (10) As you begin your day, pray for God to grant you a plentitude of wonders everywhere you go this day. Each time today that you heighten your appreciation of the wonders that are yours to experience, give God thanks.

Day 6 Offer petitions to God that you will be nudged, pushed, or shocked out of complacency regarding the prejudices, catastrophes, and/or atrocities suffered by others – in your neighborhood, in your city, in the nation, throughout the earth. Pray also for God's provision, as you seek how to respond to such challenges.

Day 7 On the day appointed for sabbath in your tradition, contemplate the grandeur of God's presence in time and eternity, think on the plentitude of creative forces in all of

life, consider how you yourself have been graced with creative capacities, all the while enjoying and celebrating the mystery of it all.

NOTES

- 1 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Ineffable Name of God: Man. Poems*, trans. Morton M. Leifman (New York: Continuum, 2005) (originally published in Yiddish, Hunter Publishing House, Warsaw, Poland, 1933).
- 2 See Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper Perrenial, 2001), p. xiv.
- 3 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Who Is Man?* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1965), p.52.
- 4 See Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Young, 1951).
- 5 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1962), pp. 221ff, esp. p. 226.
- 6 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1955), pp. 74-78.
- 7 from Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man's Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism* (New York: Charles Scriber's Sons, 1954); see also "No Religion is an Island," *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays by Abraham Joshua Heschel*, edited by Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), p. 264, and published originally in *Union Theological Seminary Quarterly Review*, Vol. 21 (1966).
- 8 Abraham Joshua Heschel, "On Prayer," *Conservative Judaism*, Vol. XXV, No. 1, Fall 1970.
- 9 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1951), p. 8.
- 10 *The Ineffable Name of God: Man. Poems*, p. 23.

FOR FURTHER REDING, STUDY, AND REFLECTION

- Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Ineffable Name of God: Man - Poems*, trans. Morton M. Leifman (New York: Continuum, 2005) (originally published in Yiddish, Hunter Publishing House, Warsaw, Poland, 1933)
- Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1955)
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- Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1951)
- Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Who Is Man?* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1965)