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The growing popularity of the works of Professor Abraham Joshua Heschel attests to the fact that his approach has struck a responsive chord in the hearts of thinking contemporary Jews. Heschel draws heavily upon Jewish mysticism and Hasidism, and his mastery of English prose lends his work great charm. Professor Marvin Fox, a member of TRADITION'S Editorial Committee, here presents an analysis of two problems in Heschel's writings, one of a general theological nature and the other specifically Jewish. Dr. Fox is professor of philosophy at Ohio State University and is active in a number of national Jewish organizations. He received his Jewish education at the Hebrew Theological College of Chicago. His articles have appeared in both academic philosophic journals and various Anglo-Jewish periodicals. He is currently working on a comprehensive study of the philosophy of Maimonides.

## HESCHEL, INTUITION, AND THE HALAKHAH

In the drabness of the landscape of Jewish thought in America the writings of Professor Abraham Joshua Heschel stand out brilliantly. His works are fresh and vital, casting light where it is sorely needed, and helping us to achieve a renewed understanding of what it means to be a Jew. While we can learn much from Heschel, there are some points in his philosophy of religion and of Judaism which require revision or, at least, a different emphasis. This brief essay proposes to examine several of these points in order to see whether Heschel's position is sound and whether it is in accord with the main body of Jewish teaching.\*

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\*This essay is based on Heschel's book, *God in Search of Man* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1956). All quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from this volume.

I

Philosophy of religion, according to Heschel, is concerned, among other things, with clarifying and validating the claims of particular religions. If we want to validate religious insights we must have a method, and, the only method which Dr. Heschel offers us is intuition. He explicitly rejects the claim that religious truth can be established by some kind of empirical technique or by discursive reason. The existence of God, revelation, God's working in history, the uniqueness of human nature — none of these can be established either by observation or demonstration. Our certainties about these matters are ultimately dependent on direct intuition.

The most common objection to any theory based on intuition is that we have no reliable way to distinguish between those experiences which are genuine perceptions of a higher reality and experiences which are mere delusions or hallucinations. How can we be certain whether a given intuition is a prophetic vision or the aberration of a madman? Dr. Heschel has taken note of this difficulty and has tried to deal with it. His answer consists of the assertion that the man who has had a true experience of the divine is so completely in the power of that vision that he is absolutely incapable of doubt or uncertainty. Obviously this is not a solution of the problem, but merely an avoidance of it, since we are given no criterion by which we can distinguish between genuine and delusory experiences.

There are some other aspects of this same problem which Professor Heschel has not dealt with in his book, but which require some comment. Must we not admit the equal validity of every religious doctrine which bases itself on intuition? Can we reject all but our own? Surely we, as Jews, are bound to insist on the truth of our own position and to reject any religious view that contradicts our teachings. Presumably, devout Christians will find themselves in precisely the same position with regard to the articles of their faith. But on what ground do we make such a selection? Is there any element in the intuitive experience that should lead us to believe that *our* intuitions alone are correct and that all others are false? Can any persuasive arguments be for-

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mulated in favor of one given set of intuitions as *the true set*? In the market-place of competing and often contradictory religious ideas the appeal to intuition seems to be a self-defeating weapon. If it is used to justify one doctrine it can be used with equal success to justify every other doctrine. The net result, it would appear, is an intolerable theological chaos, which offers a fertile field for the saccharine inanities of the "good-will" movement.

Furthermore, a religion which depends on intuition as its primary method restricts itself to a very small segment of mankind. Great spiritual sensitivity is not very widespread. What are we to do about the largest proportion of mankind, those who are neither prophets nor the sons of prophets? According to Rabbinic tradition, during the revelation at Sinai even the untutored hand-maidens had greater prophetic visions than Ezekiel was to experience at a later time. But we, the Jews of this age, do not have this rare prophetic gift. Flashes of insight, moments of spiritual exaltation, soul-shattering visions are available to very few of us. A conception of religion which is rooted in such experiences automatically restricts the realm of faith to a small group of the spiritually elite.

Professor Heschel believes that "the supreme problem in any philosophy of Judaism [and, presumably, in the other major religions as well] is: what are the grounds for believing in the realness of the living God?" and he asks whether man is capable of discovering such grounds. According to his analysis there are three ways that lead man to God, three ways of reliable intuition. Man can come to a knowledge of God by sensing His "presence in the world, in things, . . . sensing His presence in the Bible, . . . sensing His presence in sacred deeds." But each of these three ways, it can be argued, is open only to the man who is already responsive to the reality of God; they will be of little help to others.

If one looks at the world with the eyes of the spirit closed, he is likely to see nothing at all of religious significance. It is true that a man who already conceives of the world as a divine creation can see evidence of divinity throughout the realms of nature and history. However, the mind that finds in nature nothing

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but matter and motion and that sees man as only one more animal in the natural order is not likely to achieve religious insight through this route. To see the sublime, and the more than sublime, in the world one must look with the eyes of faith. There is no evidence that men can achieve that faith by inspecting the world.

The proposal that men can find God in the Bible involves us in a similar difficulty. The reader who approaches the Bible in the conviction that it is a divine book will have his religious awareness deepened and intensified by study of the sacred text. What reason have we to hope that the reader who denies the divinity of the Bible will also be able to find his way to God through the instrumentality of that great work? All that Professor Heschel has to say about the divine character of the Bible will be convincing only to those who already agree with him. There is perhaps a tacit recognition of this fact in his almost too vigorous defense of the Bible. Each of his arguments begs the question, since it presupposes what is to be proved. A typical example may be seen in his basic argument which states that failure to respond to the Bible is testimony of the limitations of the reader and not the book. "No sadder proof can be given by a man of his own spiritual opacity than his insensitiveness to the Bible." "We accept it because in approaching it our own splendid ideas turn pale, because even indisputable proofs appear vulgar at the sound of prophetic words . . . Ultimately, then, we do not accept the Bible because of reasons, but because if the Bible is a lie all reasons are a fake."

True as we believe these claims to be, they are not an argument. Men who stand outside the world of the Bible will only be perplexed or enraged by such strong demands. Having examined the very same pages, they often discover nothing more than a collection of superstitions and errors, which seem to be the work of relatively undeveloped primitive minds. To these men belief in the Bible is evidence of a shallow intelligence and a weak character. Exchanging epithets will not solve the problem, nor will vociferous reassertions of our counter-claims. We, who have found light and inspiration in the Bible, must acknowledge that we are dependent on intuition. By way of this intuition we sense

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the presence of God in even the most ordinary words of sacred Scripture. But how can the Bible serve as a pathway to God for those who approach it without religious faith and without any sense of the spiritual impoverishment of their humdrum lives?

The third of Professor Heschel's ways to God seems also to suffer from essentially the same difficulty. At first glance it appears that even men who stand outside the world of faith may be able to discover God through the performance of sacred deeds. Presumably this is a way which is open to men whose intellectual orientation has closed their eyes to the presence of God in nature, in history, in the Bible. For no matter what they think or believe, they can act as if they believed: מתוך שלא לשמה בא לשמה. As Professor Heschel himself puts it, "A Jew is asked to take a *leap of action* rather than a *leap of thought*. He is asked to surpass his needs, to do more than he understands in order to understand more than he does . . . Through the ecstasy of deeds he learns to be certain of the hereness of God. Right living is a way to right thinking."

This, too, is a road which can lead to religious conviction only if it presupposes some measure of such conviction. If a man performs deeds without any sense of their spiritual significance whatsoever how can they be effective in leading him to God? In his later exposition of the *mitzvot*, Dr. Heschel himself argues impressively against mere mechanical observances which reduce the religious life to a kind of "sacred physics." A "leap of action" must be religiously motivated if it is to lead a man to awareness of the reality of God. As Dr. Heschel puts it, "At the beginning is the *commitment, the supreme acquiescence*." Without the commitment of faith a man is most unlikely to undertake the performance of "sacred deeds," and if he should they will be mere posturings without any spiritual effect.

This very point, I believe, is the one that should be stressed most of all. We cannot depend on direct intuition. Perhaps this is what Rabbi Yochanan meant when he taught that since the destruction of the Holy Temple prophecy was taken away from the prophets and given to madmen and children. Sober men know how utterly unreliable intuitions can be. Those who envision themselves as having direct insight into ultimate truth

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too often turn out to be either mad or infantile. Professor Heschel's position would be far sounder if he consistently put the main emphasis on the initial act of faith, on "the supreme acquiescence."

Contemporary Jews can come to live a life of Torah-loyalty in one of two ways. Some simply accept the entire tradition as valid because they received it from parents and teachers. For them there are no very serious personal or intellectual obstacles to a Torah-true life, and it is not to them that Professor Heschel has addressed his writings. Their faith is firm.

The Jew who is perplexed and searching is our special concern. He will never be persuaded to live as a Jew by an appeal to religious intuitions which he does not have and cannot understand. Instead of being asked to look for evidences of God in nature or in the Bible, he must be confronted with the greatest of all challenges — the challenge to find meaning in his own life. He must be forced to see that without God and His Torah men are reduced to being animals and automata. Our faith does not derive from personal prophetic visions or from moments of personal revelation. It is forced upon us as the only alternative to forfeiting our very humanity. Only when we recognize the depth of our own need are we ready, in faith, to pass beyond the limits of our discursive knowledge. We then affirm that "In the beginning God created," because we recognize that to deny God means to destroy ourselves. With this faith we are endowed with heightened awareness so that the evidence of God's presence in nature and history are apparent to us. With this faith we are able to discover something of the divine truth hidden in each letter of sacred scripture. Not in vain did Maimonides set down as the first principle in his Code the obligation to know that God exists and that He is the source of all being. Without this conviction there can be no religious thought, no religious intuition, and no religious action.

In summary, our difference with Professor Heschel on this point is one of direction. He seems to suggest in many places that intuition is the way to faith. We are arguing that faith must precede intuition. This view seems more consistent with post-exilic Jewish tradition which saw the age of prophecy as ended, and

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a more realistic approach to the religious dilemma of the contemporary Jew.

### II

Dr. Heschel's philosophy of Judaism reflects his general philosophy of religion. The Judaism which he sets forth is a religion of deep spiritual craving, of an insatiable thirst for God. While he acknowledges and even stresses the absolute importance of Halakhah it is quite clear that he demands something beyond Halakhah. "The meaningfulness of the mitzvot," he says, "consists in their being vehicles by which we advance on the road to spiritual ends." The implication is that the *mitzvot* themselves are insufficient for the elevation of man's spirit, that they are a means to a higher end. In fact, very early in his book Dr. Heschel affirms that "Religion is, indeed, little more than a desiccated remnant of a once living reality when reduced to terms and definitions, to codes and catechisms."

There can be little quarrel with the ideal representation of Judaism which Professor Heschel has formulated. Any fair examination of the authentic Jewish tradition will recognize, with Dr. Heschel, that it seeks a disciplined life whose pattern is set by Halakhah with the aim of bringing man as close as possible to God. But even among faithful and pious Jews the exalted spiritual moments are infrequent. One has the feeling that Professor Heschel has over-emphasized this dimension of the religious life, that he places too little value on the ordinary routine of piety and demands far too much spiritual fire of the ordinary Jew.

Is it necessary to go as far as Dr. Heschel does in his absolute requirement of spontaneity, burning religious feeling, and inner devotion? Must we, in effect, scorn the piety of the vast numbers of meticulously observant Jews because it is often routine and mechanical? Does not such a view of Judaism grant (without intending to do so) the old (and probably malicious) charge that the letter kills while the spirit gives life? With all of Dr. Heschel's repeated affirmations of the fundamental need for Halakhah in the religious life, his qualifications and restrictions of the place

of Halakhah undermine the effectiveness of his stand. Jewish tradition devoted its major efforts to the development of Halakhah without qualifications or apology. Judaism recognized (in Heschel's own words) that "man may be commanded to act in a certain way, but not to feel in a certain way; that the actions of man may be regulated, but not his thoughts or emotions." A Jew who lives in accordance with Halakhah has done all that can be asked of him. Whenever he acts in response to the *mitzvah*, he draws close to God, even if he never has a mystical experience, even if he never knows the anguish of craving for the divine presence and the transcendent joy of breaking through the barriers. Professor Heschel seems to underestimate the worth of the most prosaic fulfillment of the divine commandments.

While we applaud the skill with which he has explicated and defended the often neglected Aggadah we must note that this enthusiasm seems to have blinded him somewhat to the special place of Halakhah in Judaism. For, according to Dr. Heschel, "Halakhah does not deal with the ultimate level of existence." He believes that "The law does not create in us the motivation to love and to fear God, nor is it capable of endowing us with the power to overcome evil and to resist its temptations, nor with the loyalty to fulfill its precepts. It supplies the weapons; it points the way; the fighting is left to the soul of man."

The greatest Jewish sages were, of course, cognizant of the importance of Aggadah and many of them made brilliant contributions to aggadic literature. Nevertheless, they consistently centered the bulk of their study and concern on Halakhah. Their preference for Halakhah indicates that they found in it far more than Professor Heschel does. They were convinced that Halakhah *does* deal with the ultimate level of existence. They understood that Halakhah is more than a dry legal code and that halakhic study is more than intricate mental gymnastics. By way of Halakhah Judaism grasped in a clear and communicable form the profoundest religious insights. Dr. Heschel fails to see this when he attacks "pan-halakhic theology" as "a view which exalts the Torah only because it discloses the law, not because it discloses a way of finding God in life." Jewish tradition has always taught that Halakhah is the only reliable way of finding God in life.

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In Halakhah Judaism bridges the gap between the man of rare spiritual genius and the rest of the people. The great religious insights, which are ordinarily restricted to men of prophetic sensitivity, are made available and real through Halakhah to every Jew in all the ordinary circumstances of his every-day life.

“Insights are not a secure possession; they are vague and sporadic; they are like divine sparks, flashing up before us and becoming obscure again, and we fall back into a darkness ‘almost as black as that in which we were before.’” Because he sees very clearly that we cannot rest with such insights, Professor Heschel goes on to ask the most earnest questions. “The problem,” he says, “is: How to communicate those rare moments of insight to all the hours of our life? How to commit intuition to concepts, the ineffable to words, insight to rational understanding? How to convey our insights to others and to unite in a fellowship of faith?” Surely Dr. Heschel must admit that the historic Jewish answer to his questions has always been a reliance on Halakhah. Given the vagueness and insecurity of our moments of insight they must be translated into terms that are related to man’s life in order to be effective. This is precisely what Halakhah does. It is an objectification of Israel’s collective religious experience, a concrete expression, in human terms, of those elusive truths granted us through divine revelation and grasped in especially sensitive moments by our choicest spirits. The entire structure of Halakhah is the Jewish way of committing “intuition to concepts, the ineffable to words, insight to rational understanding.” This is neither a rejection of religious thinking, nor a derogation of theology. It is not a condemnation of the restless craving of men for spiritual exaltation and overpowering insight. What we are insisting upon is that all of these are present in Halakhah.

In spite of his strictures Dr. Heschel will surely grant that the talmudic discourse concerning “the ox which gored the cow” is not merely an arid discussion of certain technical problems in the law of damages. It is the Jewish way of concretizing the presence of God in the most mundane aspects of daily life. Rabbi Elazar ben Chisma made this point eminently clear when he laid down the principle קנין ופתחי גדה הן הן גופי הלכות. This is

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the view of the world of Halakhah as an ideal world in which we meet God face to face. What seems impractical and irrelevant is shown in that world to be especially meaningful. What seems ugly and indelicate is transformed in that world to the highest level of beauty and refinement. In his life and in his study, the halakhic Jew renews continually the essence of his own being. Though he may have no great moments of mystical insight he is, nevertheless, always very close to God, for it is the objectification of divine reality in Halakhah that stands at the center of the halakhic life. It is only in Halakhah that moments of genuine religious awareness are given a stable, intelligible, and communicable form.

This explains the consistent priority which rabbinic tradition gave to halakhic literature as an subject of study. How revealing is the rabbinic observation that the study of sacred Scripture is only a partially satisfactory activity, while the most desirable of all study is the study of *Gemara*: "They who occupy themselves with the Bible (alone) are but of indifferent merit; with Mishnah, are indeed meritorious . . . ; with Gemara — there can be nothing more meritorious" (*B. M.*, 33a). This teaches us that the apparently dry legalisms of halakhic debate encompass all of the divine beauty and wisdom of the Bible. Even more than this — divine revelation receives its most specifically concrete and crystallized form in halakhic discourse and halakhic decision. However lovely and moving the flights of aggadic imagination may be, they lack the stability and clarity of Halakhah. Aggadah may inspire us, but only Halakhah can give direction to our actions. The need for aggadic inspiration is granted without question, but Aggadah is effective only with halakhic discipline and direction. God and man can find each other only by way of the bridge of halakhic study and action, for we have been taught that "Since the day that the Temple was destroyed the Holy One blessed be He has nothing in this world but the four cubits of Halakhah alone" (*Berakhot*, 8a). The world of Halakhah is the distillation of all our authentic efforts to encounter the divine. It is in that world that man elevates himself so that he can be with God.

Repeatedly, in his writings, Professor Heschel affirms this very

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same point, only then to back away from it because of a fear of "pan-halakhism." It is this hesitation about the full power of Halakhah that is inconsistent with the normative Jewish tradition. At his best, Dr. Heschel offers us a superb exposition of the ultimate significance and the ultimate claim of Halakhah. His philosophy of Judaism would be immeasurably strengthened if he held to his own insights with complete consistency.