Berkovits, Heschel, and the Heresy of Divine Pathos

In the Spring-Summer 1964 issue of Tradition, the editors introduced an article by Rabbi Dr. Eliezer Berkovits reviewing Abraham Joshua Heschel’s theology of divine pathos with a surprising rejoinder. Added to Berkovits’ biographical information, the editors appended this note:

A number of articles in previous issues of Tradition stressed the positive contributions of Dr. Heschel’s thought. In this controversial essay, which has evoked sharp differences of opinion among the members of our editorial board, Dr. Eliezer Berkovits, Professor of Jewish Philosophy at the Hebrew Theological College in Skokie, Illinois, addressed himself to what he views as crucial defects in Dr. Heschel’s approach.¹

The editorial board of the time, headed by Walter S. Wurzburger, consisted of Elihu Marcus, Emanuel Rackman, Leon D. Stitskin, Louis M. Tuchman, and the young Lawrence A. Kobrin. In addition, the editorial committee included such eminences as Emanuel Feldman, Marvin Fox, Immanuel Jakobovits, Norman Lamm, Michael Wyschogrod, and Eliezer Berkovits himself. Some members of this illustrious group had themselves courted controversy, and others had written positive reviews of some of Heschel’s other works.² In brief, Heschel created a theological interpretation of the prophetic experience, which he termed “divine pathos.” The construct incorporates three interlacing aspects: that God cares about the world, that the prophets experience and sympathize with God, and that, as a result, the prophets press humans to act in ways that impact God’s feelings towards the world. Berkovits challenged all three

components of Heschel’s theology and argued that Heschel’s theology reflected Christian interpretation of the Bible.

In the middle of the essay the editors issued another clarification:

The author inserted this addendum in an attempt to answer the criticisms by several members of our Editorial Board who pointed to the many similarities between Professor Heschel’s views and basic kabbalistic and Hasidic doctrines. —Ed (94).

Berkovits explained how Heschel’s theology of pathos and sympathy with the Divine differs from some kabbalistic thinkers such as R. Hayyim Vital, R. Moshe Hayyim Luzzato (Ramhal), and R. Hayyim of Volozhin.

Berkovits reproduced this essay in his 1974 collection, *Major Themes in Modern Philosophies of Judaism*.3 That collection includes essays on thinkers that he considered outside Jewish tradition. As Berkovits writes in the forward, “The analysis [in this volume] is critical. I believe that in my criticism, I have given illustrative expression to the conviction that at this time, we have neither a theology nor a philosophy of Judaism that does justice to the essential nature of Jewish teaching about God, man, and the universe as expressed in the classical sources of Judaism, nor one that can be maintained with contemporary philosophical validity.” The volume includes new and previously published essays on Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, Reconstructionist theology, and faith and law. The final article is his critique of Heschel. The essays are almost the same; however, in an updated version, Berkovits omits the caveats inserted by Tradition’s editors. Even though Berkovits sees all these modern theological approaches wanting, he reserves his strongest barbs for Heschel, arguing, “there is little doubt that, in the context of Jewish thought and religious sensitivity, Dr. Heschel’s position is most original . . . it does not take much perspicuity to realize that one has encountered these concepts in one’s readings – in Christian theology” (97).

The harshness of Berkovits’ criticism is surprising. In those days he was no stranger to controversy, and knew firsthand what it meant to be the subject of critique. Around the time that he published the original essay, he was embroiled in defending his position on conditional Jewish marriage.4

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3 Eliezer Berkovits, *Major Themes in Modern Philosophies of Judaism* (Ktav, 1974). All quotations will be taken from the original essay in *Tradition*, unless otherwise specified.

4 Marc B. Shapiro, *Between the Yeshiva World and Modern Orthodoxy: The Life and Works of Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg, 1884–1966* (Liverpool University Press, 1999), 190–192, esp. n. 82.
The disagreement deserves reevaluation given that there appears to be a renewed interest in the writings of Heschel and Berkovits as twentieth-century Jewish thinkers. The recent reprinting of Heschel’s discourse on rabbinic thought, *Torah min ha-Shamayim*, by a mainstream religious publishing house, as well as other translations of his classic works, has made his philosophy accessible to a new generation, especially in religious Zionist circles in Israel. In recent years, several works by Eliezer Berkovits have been reissued in their English originals. These new editions will undoubtedly renew an essential debate about these Jewish thinkers’ role and contribution to modern Jewish theological discourse.

Focusing on a rationalist framework, while Heschel relies on a kabbalistic read of Jewish tradition, Berkovits’ critique does a disservice to Hershel’s philosophy. One need not suggest that Berkovits’ theological positions are untenable or that his readings of sources are spurious to argue that Heschel’s views of prophecy and theology find legitimate grounding in biblical, rabbinic, and mystical tradition. The goal of this essay is not to debate which thinker advances a more persuasive interpretation of one verse or another. Rather, my aim is to question Berkovits’ claim that Heschel’s interpretation of prophecy is foreign to Jewish tradition. Claiming that Heschel’s theology fits with traditional sources does not negate the novelty of his approach. In fact, from within tradition Heschel presents a legitimate, competing, and compelling understanding of prophecy.

In several ways, Heschel and Berkovits share overlapping biographies. Born a year apart, they both received doctorates at the University of Berlin in the early 1930s under the shadow of the Nazis. Both escaped Germany—the fascists expelled Heschel to his native Poland while Berkovits fled to Leeds. Both briefly resided in England during the early days of World War II and eventually made it to the United States, where they assumed positions teaching Jewish philosophy.

However, the parallels end there. Heschel, raised in the Hasidic world of Warsaw, “made a quantum leap . . . to cosmopolitan Europe as

he entered the . . . Mathematics-Natural Science Gymnasium . . known as the Real Gymnasium” in Vilna. In the gymnasium, university-trained professors taught science, literature, and social sciences. The Transylvanian Berkovits studied in the Hungarian traditional-style yeshiva of Pressburg and followed an even more traditional Romanian style yeshiva education.

By the time he arrived in Berlin, Heschel had opted to study for rabbinical ordination at the Liberal Hochschule fur die Wissenschaft des Judentums. Berkovits, on the other hand, received semikha from the Orthodox Rabbiner-Seminar (also known as the Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary). Upon arrival in the United States, Heschel first taught at the Reform Hebrew Union College and subsequently at the Conservative movement’s Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, from 1946 until his death in 1972. By 1958, after rabbinical posts in Leeds, Sydney, and Boston, Berkovits became the chairman of the philosophy department at the orthodox Hebrew Theological College in Chicago. It is not a coincidence that while Berkovits’ official post was in philosophy, Heschel’s was in theology and mysticism.

Heschel gravitated towards the poetic in his search for personal authenticity. This attitude is reflected in the publication of several poems as early as 1926, at the age of 20, and subsequently in his book of poetry, Der Shem ha-meforash: mentsh (1933). In the words of Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, the translator of several of Heschel’s poems, “perhaps all of Heschel’s work afterwards is . . . to make explicit what was already implicit in his poems.”

Both were prolific writers, each authoring almost twenty books and numerous articles. Nevertheless, their writings demonstrate a different temperament. Both published widely on the Bible and Jewish thought; however, Berkovits also ventured into the waters of halakha, both on the practical and theoretical level. He authored Ha-Halakha Kohah ve-Tafkidah on general halakhic approaches, which was condensed in an English version as Not in Heaven: The Nature and Function of Halakha. He also wrote controversial yet erudite halakhic works such as Tenai be-Nisu’in ve-Get presenting a proposed solution to the problem of agunot. Heschel wrote on almost every area of Jewish thought; however, except perhaps the posthumously published third volume of Torah min

8 A beautiful description of the impact of his Hasidic upbringing and attempt to translate this into a theology for American Judaism can be found in, Arthur Green, “Abraham Joshua Heschel: Recasting Hasidism For Moderns,” Modern Judaism 29:1, (Feb. 2009), 62–79.

ha-Shamayim, he was more interested in writing on social issues. While Berkovits was a philosopher and halakhist, Heschel was interested in aggada and critical of Jews who placed priority on halakha over aggada, or, as he put it, were “pan-halakhists.”10 Both wrote on prayer, yet Berkovits’ writings are generally prosaic; Heschel’s, poetic.11

Their respective attachments to the State of Israel also highlight their different tendencies. Berkovits moved to Israel and wrote works trying to integrate halakha and the State. Heschel, for his part, wrote in support of the State, but his home was the multicultural world of America.12

In some ways, their divergent paths remind one of the splits between Maimonides and Yehuda Halevi, the two great medieval Jewish thinkers. Maimonides, who had a predilection for Greek thought and saw God in an Aristotelian and Platonic manner, spent much of his literary effort in the realm of Jewish law, as did Berkovits. Halevi, like Heschel, composed poetry and prayers and emphasized the personal aspect of God who works in history. The parallel, while imperfect, highlights Berkovits’ move towards philosophy and Heschel’s emphasis on immanence.13

The notion of divine pathos as a critical component of prophecy lies at the heart of much of Heschel’s thinking. In his own words, “I consider [the idea of pathos] to be the central idea in prophetic theology.”14 Shalom Carmy goes as far as to say that “Heschel’s doctrine of divine pathos and his thesis that prophetic experience involves sympathy with the divine pathos, are probably his most stimulating contribution to theology.”15

According to Berkovits, this central concept in Heschel’s theology not only inaccurately reflects Jewish tradition but is Christian at its core. While several authors have reviewed Berkovits’ criticism of Heschel, a

11 Compare, for example, Eliezer Berkovits, Prayer (Yeshiva University Press, 1962), and A. J. Heschel, Man’s Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism (Scribner, 1983).
15 Shalom Carmy, “Modern Jewish Philosophy: Fossil or Ferment?” TRADITION 15:3 (1975), 147.
full assessment demonstrating the building blocks of Heschel’s thought in traditional sources has yet to be fully presented. This is especially true of mystical works that served as foundations of his understanding of Jewish theology. In fact, Heschel saw his view of divine pathos as following a traditional pattern and, indeed, has support from kabbalistic and other classical sources.

Berkovits’ harsh tone is striking. It is unclear why he is so unforgiving. Although the other essays in the 1974 collection are all critical of their subject matter, he reserved his strongest censure for Heschel. After discussing their relationship with members of Berkovits’ family, personal animus does not seem to be the cause. They were reported to have been on good terms in Germany. For example, soon after their rise to power, the Nazi government—seeking to document sources of Jewish deviance—approached Heschel to write a small book describing the Talmud; Heschel suggested Berkovits prepare the volume instead.

Kaplan suggests that the well-documented coolness between Heschel and Saul Lieberman, and perhaps even Louis Finkelstein, was the outgrowth of professional jealousy. Such conjecture is often unproductive. While Heschel was probably the most famous and celebrated of the four (Heschel, Lieberman, Finkelstein, and Berkovits) outside the academy, they all had successes and setbacks. That Heschel, an observant Jew, traveled in liberal Jewish circles also seems like an unlikely reason for Berkovits’ critique, given that the other subjects in Berkovits’ collection were not traditional. The most likely reason is that Berkovits honestly thought that Heschel’s theories of divine pathos and the notion that the prophet can both feel with God and impact the divine realm were heretical and had no rational basis or even support in Jewish tradition.

The Disagreement Over Divine Pathos

Before analyzing Berkovits’ critique, we would do well to review Heschel’s understanding of prophecy and the definition and role of divine pathos and prophetic sympathy within the Jewish experience.

17 Eliezer Berkovits, “What is the Talmud” [German], (Jüdischer Buch-Verlag Erwin Löwe, 1938), available in English and Hebrew translation at: www.sefaria.org/What_is_the_Talmud, introduction.
18 Kaplan, *Spiritual Radical*, 110.
19 Many have written on Heschel’s understanding of pathos. See Dror Bondi, *Ayeka: Sheilato shel Elohim be-Haguto shel Avraham Yehoshua Heschel* (Shalem Press, 2002);
Heschel saw his life’s project as discovering and clarifying an authentically Jewish way of thinking. He suggests that a Hellenistic framing influences much of the way Jews discuss theology. In a lecture addressed to teachers, he proclaimed,

We are essentially trained in a non-Jewish world. . . . We are inclined to think in non-Jewish terms. . . . I am not discouraging exposure to the non-Jewish world. I am merely indicating that it is not Biblical thinking. It is not Rabbinic thinking. It is not Hasidic thinking. It is non-Jewish thinking . . . we would also like to have in our thinking a Jewish view of things. . . . I say to you personally that this has been my major challenge . . . that is: How to think in a Jewish way of thinking? This was the major concern and the major thesis of my dissertation Die Prophetie. Since that day I consider this to be my major effort. It is not an easy enterprise. 20

On this, Heschel remained consistent over time in his views of Jewish thought. No matter the subject—biblical studies, rabbinics, medieval philosophy, mysticism, or modern Jewish thought—he viewed Judaism within an overarching rubric of meaning which he considered authentically Jewish. 21

In a 1968 talk, a fully matured Heschel proposes, “This idea [pathos] is an explication of the idea of God in search of man . . . which I consider to be the summary of Jewish theology.” 22 He makes abundantly clear that the notion of divine pathos he developed while researching his doctorate in the 1930s, and fleshed out in the later English edition of that early work, remained a central pillar of the entirety of Jewish theology.

At the beginning of The Prophets, Heschel outlines how pathos plays a critical role in the prophetic experience and defines for the reader what he means by the term:

An analysis of prophetic utterances shows that the fundamental experience of the prophet is a fellowship with the feelings of God, a sympathy with the divine pathos, a communion with the divine consciousness which comes about through the prophet’s reflection of, or participation

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in, the divine pathos. The typical prophetic state of mind is one of being taken up into the heart of the divine pathos.23

Heschel claims that God communicates some sort of “feelings” and that the role of the prophet is to have sympathy with that emotion or, in other words, to share the emotional state of the Divine, to understand God’s aspirations for the world, and respond by helping to bring them to fruition.

For Heschel, without the notion of pathos, there can be no prophecy. “The fundamental experience of the prophet is a fellowship with the feelings of God.”24 He believes the biblical prophetic writings deeply reflect this notion of sympathy with God, and indeed, “one cannot understand the word without sensing the Pathos.” Without an awareness of God’s emotional-ethical concern for the world, the prophetic writings are a closed book.

Pathos is how prophets understand the “implication in His acts.” Pathos is sensed through awareness of God’s will. “The basic feature of the divine pathos is not conceived of as an essential attribute of God, as something objective . . . but as an expression of God’s will.”25 The discussion of pathos is an interpretation of how God acts in the world. God relates to the world in such a manner as to communicate a moral sensibility.

God acts with clear intent. “[Pathos] is not a passion, an unreasoned emotion, but an act formed with intention, rooted in decision and determination; not an attitude taken arbitrarily, but one charged with ethos; not a reflexive, but a transitive act. To repeat, its essential meaning is not to be seen in its psychological denotation, as standing for a state of the soul, but in its theological connotation, signifying God as involved in history, as intimately affected by events in history, as living care.”26 In other words, pathos is a theological construct expressing God’s involvement in the world and demonstrating care for his creatures; “it is a transitive act.”27 Briefly, it demonstrates that God cares about what happens in the world.

Heschel struggles with a clear definition of pathos especially considering the notion of God’s anger. “The major difficulty in our attempt to understand the issue is in the failure to sense the ambiguity and

23 Abraham Joshua Heschel, The Prophets (JPS, 1962), 26. All citations will be from this first edition.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
the homonymous aspect of the terms denoting the pathos of anger.”

For Heschel, the claim that God has uncontrolled emotions would be anathema to the prophets. “The word ‘anger’ is charged with connotations of spite, recklessness, and iniquity. The biblical term, however, denotes what we call righteous indignation, aroused by that which is considered mean, shameful, or sinful; it is impatience with evil, ‘a motion of the soul rousing itself to curb sins.’ The free, voluntary nature of divine anger is expressed in the words spoken to Moses after the people worshiped the golden calf (Exodus 32:10). Without Moses’ consent, God’s anger would not turn against the people.” Unlike human emotions, which are uncontrolled and spontaneous eruptions, divine pathos is an act of will communicated through the divine relationship.

The divine pathos, whether mercy or anger, was never thought of as an impulsive act, arising automatically within the divine Being as the reaction to man’s behavior and as something due to peculiarity of temperament or propensity. It is neither irrational nor irresistible. Pathos results from a decision, from an act of will. It comes about in the light of moral judgement rather than in the darkness of passion.

God freely chooses what we understand as emotions. Far from the anthropopathic language that “divine pathos” conveys, the term for Heschel means that what God projects as emotions are unlike the uncontrollable human emotions. Humans do not rationally decide their emotional state of being; however, God’s emotional relations to the world are an act of will and decision.

Heschel repeatedly emphasizes that pathos should not be confused with God’s essence. God cares about the world and relates that concern through pathos, but it is not the divine inner life. Prophets internalize God’s investment in justice and righteousness. “The prophets never identify God’s pathos with His essence, because for them the pathos is not something absolute, but a form of relation.” Indeed, pathos cannot be an absolute attribute of the divine inner life because if it were part of God’s essence, our world could not affect it. The divine pathos must be something that changes through impact with human response. “If the structure of the pathos were immutable and remained unchanged even

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28 Ibid., 281.
29 Ibid., 282.
30 Ibid., 283.
31 Ibid., 298.
32 Ibid., 231.
after the people had ‘turned,’ prophecy would lose its function, which is precisely so to influence man as to bring about a change in the divine pathos of rejection and affliction.”33

The prophetic experience cannot be understood as grasping God’s essence but rather the divine communication or relationship. “We must not think that we reach God’s essence. . . . God in Himself, His Being is a problem for metaphysics.”34 Simply put, man cannot understand God’s essence. So, what does the prophet grasp? “This then is the ultimate category of prophetic theology: involvement, attentiveness, concern.”35 Revelation is how God communicates concern for the world and its creatures. “The prophets experienced what He utters, not what He is.”36 He does not communicate His ultimate and absolute otherness. The prophet understands God the way God relates His love of the world.

Repeatedly, Heschel steps away from making claims regarding the divine essence. In what almost seems like a move towards the Maimonidean approach, he suggests “revelation means, not that God makes Himself known, but that He makes His will known.”37 God’s inner life is simply unknowable to humans. The Divine has chosen to relate His care for the world. The prophet experiences this concern, and it is to this relationship that the prophet must respond.

For Heschel, the prophet must respond to divine pathos with what he terms “sympathy”: “To feel the divine pathos as one feels one’s own state of soul.”38 The prophet feels a direct connection and understanding of the divine relationship to the world. He must develop a feeling of identifying himself emotionally with the divine pathos. “It is a unity of will and emotion, of consciousness and message.”39

When describing prophetic sympathy, Heschel vacillates a bit, as he did when discussing pathos and God’s essence. Regarding pathos, he suggested, despite sometimes using language that sounds like he is describing the divine essence, God’s emotions do not truly reflect that essence. Sympathy is not a melding of human and divine—but some sort of emotional identification. He carefully distinguishes between “divine passion” in ancient pagan religions, especially in Egypt and the Near East.

33 Ibid., emphasis added.
34 Ibid., 483–484.
35 Ibid., 484.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid., 481.
38 Ibid., 319.
39 Ibid.
In passion, the divinity is thought of as a martyr, the basis of whose suffering lies, in the last analysis, in the powerlessness of the god. In pathos, God is thought of as the supreme Master of heaven and earth, who is emotionally affected by the conduct of man. . . . [Pathos] is suffering in the sense of compassion or in the sense of moral indignation.40

In a disclaimer that his religion of sympathy should not be confused with Christian notions of human empathy for Jesus’ suffering, Heschel distinguishes between the two. Pagan and Christian passion is about a powerless, suffering god. In those religious systems, the acolyte connects to the complete suffering of a quasi-human impotent deity and imitates that suffering, “the forms of religious discipline are different . . . but at bottom line they imply the same . . . the approximation of one’s own life to the life of the god.” That is why, “the life of Jesus became the pattern for Christian piety.”41

In Heschel’s understanding of the prophets, God is an omnipotent “supreme Master” who suffers “moral indignation” for man’s failures. The prophet is filled with the same moral outrage on behalf of God. The prophet is not to imitate God’s suffering but to understand man’s present reality and failure. “Imitatio is concerned with a past, sympathy with a present occurrence. Mystical imitation is remote from history . . . what is at stake in sympathy is an actual historical situation.”42 What Heschel describes relates to hearing the call of the Divine in the present moment and responding.

Berkovits sums up Heschel’s theology suggesting,

We may express the essence of Heschel’s theory in one sentence: According to his theology of pathos, human action evokes divine pathos; according to his religion of sympathy, divine pathos evokes prophetic sympathy. Man affects God and God affects the prophet. In the dialogue between God and man, God responds with pathos; in that between the prophet and God, the prophet responds with sympathy (70).

What appears central to Heschel, that man can sympathize with God’s relationship to the world, and in turn, the Divine is somehow impacted by human endeavors to repair the world, is utterly foreign for Berkovits.

It is not easy to decide what is more objectionable, the “theology of pathos” or the “religion of sympathy.” The very idea of the prophet’s

40 Ibid., 320.
41 Ibid., 322.
42 Ibid.
feeling the feelings of God, of his establishing emotional harmony with God, of his feeling the “divine pathos” as he feels his own state of the soul . . . seems so foreign to Jewish religious teaching and experience. Even if one could accept the theology of pathos, one would have to reject most emphatically this religion of sympathy (83–84).

Anthropopathism, ascribing human feelings to God, goes too far. For Berkovits, it is inappropriate to attribute any form of emotions to Him. Even if one claimed that God has an emotional stake in the world, how would the finite human bridge the gap and sympathize with Him? At Heschel’s hand God becomes too human. “There is hardly anything in Dr. Heschel’s arguments for the divine pathos that could not be used in pleading for a bodily form of divine existence” (83). Heschel has made God into a man with emotions who can be understood and impacted or affected by human beings.

In the first part of the essay, Berkovits parses Heschel’s arguments attempting to show that one need not, or even sometimes cannot, read the biblical passages in the manner Heschel suggests. Ultimately, Berkovits moves from the “lower criticism” of Heschel’s reading of the Bible to the “higher criticism” of understanding what Heschel ultimately means by God.

Although we have heard Dr. Heschel state that the relationship between the pathos of God and the essence of God is a mystery for man and the prophet is only concerned with God in His relatedness to man, quite obviously some concept of God must be implied in the God of pathos. . . . We shall now inquire what kind of an idea of God must be associated with this theology of pathos and religion of sympathy (90).

Digging down to theological bedrock, Berkovits asks how does Heschel define God? Berkovits argues that “the pathos is significant because it is God’s pathos; nor does the prophet sympathize with the pathos but with God.” So what is the description of God which flows from this theology? “A God of pathos, who is affected by man’s behavior and responds to it emotionally — is he not a person?” (91). This question seems to be the crux of Berkovits’ critique: In Heschel’s theology God is too close to being human. Berkovits argues that Heschel knows the danger of such descriptions but fails to guard against it:

Dr. Heschel defends himself against such an [humanizing] interpretation of his theory by saying: “The idea of divine pathos is not a personification of God but an exemplification of divine reality, an illustration of
His concern. It does not represent a substance, but an act or a relationship.” . . . Yet, he also says with great emphasis: “God is all-personal, all-subject,” — and with even greater intensity of conviction he insists: ‘. . . it is because God is absolutely personal — devoid of anything impersonal — that this ethos is full of pathos.’ We maintain that this latter is the true position of Dr. Heschel, because only if we keep in mind that according to him, God in his essential nature is “all personal”, “all-subject”, “devoid of anything impersonal”, can he be understood (91).

Berkovits attempts to press Heschel to the wall. Either Heschel embraces complete anthropomorphism, or he must reject any analogy of God to humans. “A God of Pathos, who is affected by man’s behavior and responds to it emotionally — is he not a person?” Heschel has crossed the line of acceptable theology by making God in man’s image.

How is this to be understood? Dr. Heschel knows the answer: “The fact that the attitudes of man may affect the life of God, that God stands in an intimate relationship to the world, implies a certain analogy between Creator and creature.” This, of course, is the cornerstone for the understanding of Dr. Heschel’s position. . . . It is a God essentially shaped in the image of man. . . . The idea, which is of kabbalistic origin, may have its proper place in a kabbalistic system of thought. In a non-kabbalistic context, however, a god-like man still implies a man-like god (94).

There is no escaping Berkovits’ biting conclusion. Suggesting human-like attributes to God makes the Divine all-too human. This is Heschel’s true theology, and “if on one or two occasions he does mention that the difference between God and man is absolute, it is not to be taken literally.” Heschel cannot hide his true theological error and maintain his interpretation of divine pathos. Despite protestations here and there, if Heschel suggests God is understood by the prophets to have an emotional self, then he has made God into a man.

In a mystical framework such an argument could be made; however, Heschel’s The Prophets is not a work of Jewish mysticism.

Most important, however, is the consideration that Dr. Heschel does not give us a tractate on Kabbalah. He offers us a theology of pathos, outside the system of the Kabbalah. But apart from the concept of the various levels of the Sephiroth and Tzimtsumin, a “God of pathos” is only tenable if one can show how it may be philosophically and theologically reconciled with the idea of an infinite, perfect Being (95).
Outside of Kabbalah, Heschel’s interpretation falls apart. The tools of Jewish philosophy and theology have no room to admit any human characteristics such as emotions in God.

Part of the divide between the two thinkers appears to be the authentic or legitimate framing of theological discourse. Berkovits treats kabbalistic interpretation of theology secondary to philosophy. Heschel rejects that dichotomy and sees an over-arching theological tradition. However, Heschel seems wary of going as far as some kabbalists do. It seems as if Berkovits accuses Heschel of going further than Heschel actually does, even though there are sources that support far-reaching anthropopassianism.

Berkovits reserves his harshest vitriol for the end of the essay. After a brief survey of kabbalistic literature, which he added to respond to the editors of Tradition, Berkovits comments:

When [Heschel] speaks of man’s participating in “the inner life” of God and God’s sharing in the life of man, there is a somewhat familiar ring about it. When he elaborates in innumerable variations on the prophet’s feeling “His heart” and experiencing “the pain in the heart of God” as his own, or when he reveals the secret of sympathy as a situation in which “man experiences God as his own being,” it does not take much perspicuity to realize that one has encountered these concepts in one’s readings — in Christian theology (97).

Heschel’s theology is novel to Judaism because it is not Jewish. Berkovits demonstrates that in their responses to the clash between the biblical religions and Hellenism, Judaism and Christianity diverged.

Both Judaism and Christianity had to cope with the intellectual consequences of the confrontation with Greek philosophy and metaphysics. God as immutable, pure Being was not the God of the Bible. The dilemma, arising from the confrontation, was far less serious for Judaism than for Christianity. For Judaism it was a clash between metaphysical ideas and


44 Of course, the accusation that kabbalists sound Christian is far from new. Rabbi Isaac ben Sheshet Perfet and others leveled this claim against Jewish kabbalists as early as fifteenth-century Spain; see the Responsa of Rabbi Isaac ben Sheshet (Rivash), #157.
the biblical text. Solution could be found by interpreting the text. For Christianity, however, the conflict was between metaphysics and its faith in a god incarnate, who in human form walked this earth, suffered and died. Anthropomorphic texts could be reinterpreted; the passibility of Jesus could not be explained away. It is the very essence of Christian faith that the divine is to be associated with emotions, that it is affected, that it suffers or rejoices, as the case may be. . . . In Christianity God does have pathos in exactly the same sense as Dr. Heschel understands the term — as an emotional affection of the deity. Because the confrontation between Greek metaphysics and Christianity was, indeed, much more serious than that between the Greek Absolute and Judaism in [sic] a genuine theology of pathos was produced by Christian theologians (98–99).

Reading the Bible, one sees that God was not wholly other. For Greek philosophy, God was immutable. Judaism dealt with the conflict through a hermeneutical maneuver. Christianity was hobbled in the clash with Greek thought by the incarnation of God in the persona of Jesus. There was no interpretive move Christians could make. God was a man, so a theology of pathos was developed. Berkovits argues that Heschel uses Christian language and categories foreign to the Jewish interpretive tradition, which understands God as absolutely other, based on a Hellenistic philosophic framework.

Berkovits was no stranger to theological gatekeeping, yet, his derision of Heschel’s approach seems puzzling given what he wrote in an earlier article, “What is Jewish Philosophy”: “Any Interpretation, from whatever foreign source it may originate, that acknowledges God, Israel, and the Torah as historical realities and attempts to provide the metaphysical or theological corollary to the facts and events for which they stand may well be incorporated in a Jewish philosophy.” Even more startling is Berkovits’ openness to kabbalistic viewpoints.

Kabbalistic writers, however, make use of such [pantheistic] ideas in order to render the historic facts on which Judaism is based — God, Israel, and Torah — more meaningful and more challenging for the individual Jew. The result is a more intimate personal commitment to the living God, His Word, and His people. The Ari ha-Kadosh is a good example of how, as long as these constants were not lost sight of, even gnostic ideas could be included within the scope of a kabbalistic Jewish philosophy.

Despite Berkovits’ suggestion that Heschel’s work seems similar to Christian thought, one is at a loss to see how, nonetheless, it does not fit

46 Ibid., 124.
his definition of conventional Jewish thought where gnostic ideas “could be included.”

Reading Berkovits’ other theological writings increases the puzzle of his criticism of Heschel. In earlier works, Berkovits expresses similar notions to Heschel’s idea of divine pathos and concern for humanity.47 “The foundation of religion is not the affirmation that God is, but that God is concerned with man and the world; that, having created this world, he has not abandoned it, leaving it to its own devices; that he cares about his creation.”48 Berkovits’ formulation seems surprisingly similar to Heschel. Further on, Berkovits confronts the tension of the Greek absolute view of the unmoved mover and the God of the Bible. “The problem is that there exists a genuine contradiction between the concept of God and that of the Absolute. God is conceived in relationship to the world. In religion, he confronts man; he is subject—and, at times, an object—for man. . . . Without a God who relates to the world in some way, there is no religion.”49 That man knows God through the divine “care” and “relationship” to the world seems to approach Heschel’s position. Religious experience contradicts philosophical logic.50

The person who takes his stand on the ground of religion gains his most important knowledge of God through the experience of the encounter. In the encounter, he learns that the one God . . . relates with affection and care to the world that is God’s. At the same time . . . he may deduce logically . . . that the one God should be thought of as infinite and absolute. Then, when the question is asked, “How may divine absoluteness be reconciled with a caring Creator who maintains a form of relationship with his work?” the religious person may readily answer, “That, I do not know” . . . for him God has become real in the encounter.51

Berkovits’ argument that God is known through “the encounter,” sounds similar to Heschel’s idea of divine relationship to the world. That this theology runs counter to Greek thought cannot defeat the subjective experience of the encounter. Later in this section of his work, Berkovits develops the

50 Berman Shifman suggests that Berkovits might be using Heschel as a stand-in for himself and his own ideas; “The Challenge of the ‘Caring’ God,” 55.
51 Berkovits, God, Man and History, 63.
idea of “Divine self-denial,” or hiding. God limits Himself to allow for the human-divine encounter. Berkovits presents this section using philosophic terminology, which he admits echoes kabbalistic notions. Berkovits confronts the same issues as Heschel, especially considering biblical and rabbinic anthropopathic language, and comes to similar conclusions. Just as he sees his work as developing from inside traditional frameworks and foundations and not foreign ideas, so too, as will become apparent, Heschel’s theological project can be seen as a traditional Jewish response to the complexity of the human encounter with the Divine.

Heschel does not seem to have explicitly addressed Berkovits harsh criticism. Perhaps he did not deem it necessary or worthy of a response. However, Heschel’s lack of response fits his general approach to other contemporary thinkers. He eschewed criticizing others publicly.

The Biblical Foundations of Heschel’s Thought

Heschel dedicated his life to uncovering what he thought was “a Jewish way of thinking.” For Heschel, Berkovits’ critique, ironically, would seem couched in a non-Jewish way of thinking. While accusing Heschel of relying on a Christian theology, it was Berkovits’ criticism that sprung from non-Jewish ideas.

Aware of potential criticism, Heschel writes:

To speak about God as if He were a person does not necessarily mean to personify Him, to stamp Him in the image of a person. . . . The idea of the divine pathos is not a personification of God but an exemplification of divine reality, an illustration or illumination of His concern. It does not represent a substance, but an act or a relationship.

Heschel would point to the many references throughout his work that God is not man. Pathos is not found in the unknowable inner life of God but in the relationship where God communicates care. It is “an illustration or illumination of His concern.” The role of the prophet, as described in the Bible, is to be moved by that relationship and act in unity with God’s will in hopes of correcting the situation.

53 Reuven Kimelman, “Abraham Joshua Heschel’s Theology of Judaism and The Rewriting of Jewish Intellectual History,” Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy 17 (2009), 211, n. 20: “In general he avoided mentioning the targets of his critical barbs.”
54 The Prophets, 273.
Heschel asks a fundamental question regarding the treatment of the prophets. In the first chapter of Hosea, God requests the prophet marry a harlot who would not be loyal despite bearing him children. Why does God test prophets like Hosea in this way? Heschel explains,

As time went by, Hosea became aware of the fact that his personal fate was a mirror of the divine pathos, that his sorrow echoed the sorrow of God. In this fellow suffering as an act of sympathy with the divine pathos the prophet probably saw the meaning of the marriage which he had contracted at the divine behest. . . . Only by living through in his own life what the divine Consort of Israel experienced, was the prophet to attain sympathy for the divine situation. 55

For Heschel, God wants the prophet to understand the impact of the people of Israel’s infidelity. The prophet must feel the same pain evoked in the divine realm when God’s people are disloyal. “Hosea became aware of the fact that his personal fate was a mirror of the divine pathos, that his sorrow echoed the sorrow of God.” Hosea can only succeed in his mission if he understands the stakes involved. God makes the prophet suffer the heartbreak of infidelity to fulfill his mission of communicating the divine displeasure at Israel’s disloyalty.

Berkovits expresses shock: “one cannot help wondering what concept of God a person must have in order to be able to appreciate this kind of an interpretation” (90). How can the prophet feel what God feels—if indeed we can even suggest God feels anything? Heschel understands the book of Hosea to describe a God who communicates feelings of love for His nation and suffers due to their unfaithfulness.

Another biblical text that easily lends itself to Heschel’s reading of divine concern appears at the end of the book of Jonah, where the prophet becomes angered at God’s forgiveness of the people of Nineveh. Jonah runs outside the city where God causes a tree to grow and shade him. Once Jonah takes pleasure in the tree, God destroys the plant upsetting the prophet.

The Lord said: “You cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. And should not I care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well!” (Jonah 4:9–11).

55 Ibid., 56.
Heschel suggests God’s compassion for Nineveh is the central theme of the book, which exemplifies the notion of divine pathos. Indeed, Jonah had to learn that God can “change His mind,” that a decree can be annulled for the sake of compassion, enabling Jonah to understand God’s empathy for the world.

According to Berkovits, Jewish tradition rejects any interpretation of the Bible that suggests God demonstrates something like the human emotions of love and compassion. As he explains,

The Christian theologian starts out with a faith whose central affirmation is that God is passible [capable of feeling or suffering]. Given that premise, a theology of pathos is unavoidable. . . . [In Judaism] we start out with a faith that abhors any form of “humanization” of divine nature; the theological climate is determined by a long tradition of affirmation of divine impassibility in face of numerous biblical texts to the contrary. Dr. Heschel, however, decided to take some anthropopathic expressions in the Bible literally. In the light of his own interpretation of these passages he formulates a theology; in the light of his theology, he then proceeds to offer us a God who is “all-personal” and “absolutely personal,” who, since “the attitudes of man may affect the life of God,” should be understood with the help of “a certain analogy between Creator and creature.” From the Jewish point of view, these are alien and objectionable concepts (102).

Here Berkovits seems to accept that without preconceived notions, the theology Heschel reads into the biblical text fits with biblical language. For Berkovits, despite admitting that “numerous biblical texts to the contrary,” Judaism as developed in response to Greek thought, “abhors any form of ‘humanization’ of divine nature.” So, while one could read the Bible as Heschel does, Jewish tradition has rejected anything akin to attributing human characteristics to the Divine. The problem, therefore, is not Heschel’s understanding of the Bible on its own terms but post-biblical interpretation.

Shamma Friedman has argued that many modern Jewish thinkers have internalized Maimonidean notions and therefore cannot view the Bible or rabbinic literature in any other way. This modern interpretation of Jewish intellectual history contrasts with the many medieval rabbis, especially kabbalists and their sympathizers, who rejected Maimonides’ theological assumptions and read the Bible and rabbinic literature more literally. Berkovits seems to begin from this rationalistic framework and,

56 Ibid., 130.
despite himself, refuses to read the biblical texts without a Hellenistic-philosophic perspective. Yet Heschel cannot reject the implication of the passages and the prophets’ message. Not only does the idea of God’s emotional relationship to the world not originate in Christianity, but it is the most straightforward reading of the Hebrew Bible. God’s love for Israel is present throughout the Bible. That God expects prophets to share experiences of this heightened love for his creatures is the very theme of the prophetic works. The notion that God is not neutral but cares for the orphan and the widow leaps out of the text. Heschel, who was trying to strip away the non-Jewish layers forced by the clash with Greek thought, was likely puzzled by Berkovits’ criticism. As we have seen, Berkovits, in his 1959 work, seems to agree with Heschel’s reading.

Heschel’s Sources in Rabbinic and Kabbalistic Ideas

These notions, that God relates emotional investment in the world and wants others to share in these feelings, are grounded in rabbinic thought. The rabbis did not need Christianity to attribute suffering to the Divine.

Rabbi Meir said: When a person suffers, what does the Divine Presence [Shekhina] say? [As it were,] I am distressed about My head; I am distressed about My arm. If God suffers such distress over the spilled blood of the wicked, all the more so that He suffers distress over the blood of the righteous.

Here God seems to suffer in a manner that echoes human anguish. For Heschel, the pain of the Shekhina in this passage shows divine concern for man. When His creatures suffer, the Shekhina is also in pain. R. Hayyim of Volozhin, when relating to intent during prayer, presents a selection of rabbinic statements about divine suffering,

58 Mishna Sanhedrin 6:5. The Kaufmann MSS and other witnesses omit the word Shekhina as well as “as it were.” In the parallel in Bavli Sanhedrin 46b, in all witnesses, the word Shekhina appears but not “as it were.” Yerushalmi reads as does the Bavli, including the word “Shekhina” but not the term “kiyakhol.” According to Rabbi Gershon Shaul Yom-Tov Lipmann Heller in his Tosafot Yom Tov, the words Shekhina and “as it were” should come as a set. In such versions, as in Rambam’s Mishna, without Shekhina there is no need for “as it were,” but in those which include the word Shekhina, Tosafot Yom Tov suggests, the phrase “as it were” should appear. Berkovits points to the use of “as it were,” indicating that purporting emotion to God is mere metaphor; however, Heschel could rightly point out that the issue is unresolved.
The rabbis stated [Exodus Rabba 2:5] on the verse “I am sleeping” (Song of Songs 5:2), “What happens with these twins—that when one’s head hurts, the other senses it—so too states the Holy One: ‘I [God] am with him in [times of] distress’ (Psalms 91:15).” And in Tanhuma: “All salvation that comes to Israel is of the Holy One, for it states: ‘I am with him in [times of] distress’”—that is to say that it concludes with “I will show him My salvation.” It is Your salvation for it is stated, “it is for You to save us” (Psalms 80:3). And in Shoher Tov [to Psalms 13:6]: “‘My heart will exult in your salvation’—Rabbi Abahu stated: ‘This is one of the difficult texts, that the salvation of the Holy One (blessed be He) is the salvation of Israel. It does not say ‘in our salvation’ but rather ‘in Your salvation’. . . Your salvation is our salvation.” And refer to Zohar Emor [III:90b] in the matter of the verse “salvation is God’s.” And this is “I am with him in [times of] distress”—that from the constricted places, he takes God as a partner; then “I will release him. . .” 59

The suffering of the Divine—or divine participation in human suffering—seems to be a common theme in rabbinic midrash. To be sure, Nefesh ha-Hayyim (chapter 3) advocates for a complete separation of the Sefirotic post-tzimtzum world and the reality from the vantage point of the divine essence. 60 According to his interpretation, the texts presented are not addressing God’s innermost self but a realm after emanation. As argued in the next section, Heschel preferred an “essentialist” tradition of kabbalists who interpreted these sources as demonstrating the notion of divine suffering closer to God’s essence than does R. Hayyim. Furthermore, those thinkers viewed the Divine manifestation referred to as the Shekhina, often understood as the lowest of the Sefirot, and Sefirotic realm in general, as closer to if not identical with God’s essence. The role of the Shekhina and its relationship to the divine essence are discussed later in this essay. Nonetheless, this collection of sources speaks to the ubiquitous idea of divine suffering and salvation in rabbinic literature. The full text of the Zohar quoted by R. Hayyim is informative:

[Rabbi Shimon] further began and said, “Salvation is the Lord’s; Your blessing be upon Your people! Selah” (Psalms 3:9). We have learned: meritorious are the Israelites; for every place they were exiled, the Shekhina was exiled with them. When the Israelites are redeemed from exile, for whom is redemption? For Israel’s [sake] or God’s [Ha-Kadosh

59 Nefesh ha-Hayyim 2:12 (or 2:11 in Sefaria edition on which this translation is based).
60 See fn. 67 below for a discussion of the Sefirotic realm.
Baruch Hu? Indeed, in many verses, it has been explained redemption is certainly for God’s sake.\(^{61}\)

The widespread use of anthropomorphism and anthropopathism in kabbalistic literature is well known. Many versions of the Mishna in Sanhedrin quoted above use “Shekhina” and “Ha-Kadosh Baruch Hu” interchangeably. God goes into exile, and He is redeemed. Just as the Jews suffered in exile and needed salvation, God does as well.

God’s suffering plays a role in Hasidic circles as well. Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye quotes his master the Ba’al Shem Tov, “understanding that God Himself is present in all suffering we endure, whether physical or spiritual. The pain is a kind of garb for God’s presence. We know this, the garb is removed, and pain and all evil is removed.”\(^{62}\)

If God is everywhere and immanent in all things, He is also present in suffering. According to the Ba’al Shem Tov, we must understand that God is present in our suffering and that human suffering impacts God.

Heschel summarizes what he sees as a theological development in the position of the Sages regarding the bold assertion that God needs salvation from suffering and exile:

Rabbi Eliezer said: “Idols crossed the sea with the Israelites. How do we know? For it says ‘whom you have redeemed for Yourself from Egypt, people and their gods’ (II Samuel 7:23).” Rabbi Akiva responded, “Heaven forbid! Should you understand the verse that way, you would be making the holy into the profaned.” What, then, is the intention of ‘whom You have redeemed for Yourself from Egypt’? As it were [kivyakhol], You have redeemed Yourself.”\(^{63}\) Rabbi Akiva’s very style demonstrates his realization that this daring concept could upset the applecart and invite denial of God’s omnipotence and compassion. . . . In the wake of this reversal, there was affected a veritable revolution in religious thought, one that exerted a profound influence through the course of the generations. From time immemorial, the people had perceived the salvation of Israel as a human need, a national need, through which, to be sure, God’s name would be magnified in the world. But

\(^{61}\) Note the explicit use of the divine name and lack of term “as it were.”

\(^{62}\) _Toledot Yaakov Yosef, Vayakhel_, sec. 3, s.v. _le-va’er_, as quoted in Norman Lamm, _The Religious Thought of Hasidism: Text and Commentary_ (Ktav, 1999), 472.

\(^{63}\) Yerushalmi Sukka 4:3 (54c); Mekhila de-Rabbi Ishmael, _Pit’ha_ 14, Horowitz and Rabin edition (Bamberger et Yahrman, 1970), 51–52. In several variant manuscripts quoted by Horowitz the term “kivyakhol” (“as it were”) is absent!
Heschel spells out a seemingly radical position espoused by R. Akiva’s school. God needs salvation. “Indeed, the notion that God needs anything—especially salvation—is a powerful notion that the Midrash claims, ‘Were this not written, we could not have uttered it.’ And yet, it is written.”

As already demonstrated in the passage from Hosea, for Heschel, R. Akiva’s idea of divine suffering and the need for salvation has ancient roots. Heschel claims that R. Akiva’s radical notion must have had earlier sources in Jewish tradition, “What was this revolutionary concept of R. Akiva? A momentary flash of inspiration? . . . Make no mistake about it. This concept has a powerful parentage in the soul of Israel, permeated with faith and burdened with suffering.”

To support his criticism that man cannot impact the divine essence, Berkovits quotes several kabbalists: R. Hayyim Vital, R. Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto (Ramhal), and R. Hayyim of Volozhin. He argues, based on the writings of these thinkers, that

There is little doubt in our mind that neither Vital nor Luzzato would ever have dared speak of God as being possible. Man’s actions, according to the Kabbalah, do have an effect in the “higher world,” but not on God Himself. If there is Pathos in the system of Kabbalah, it is certainly below the world of Atzilut in the realms of creation, finite emanations,

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65 Indeed, Ramhal seems to explicitly warn about the dangers of taking metaphors used about God seriously. See Ramhal, *Ma’amor ha-Ikkarim* (Feldheim, 1978), 172. On the question of the impact or lack thereof of Ramhal’s works on early Hasidic thinkers see Isaiah Tishby, “The Influence of Rabbi Moses Hayyim Luzzatto in Hasidic Teaching” [Hebrew], *Zion* 43 (1978), 201–234.

66 Various kabbalistic schools envision a series of what they call worlds between the realm of the *Ein Sof* (or Divine infinitude) and our earthly cosmos. Generally, the *Ein Sof* emanated these four or five worlds: *Adam ha-Kadmon*, *Atzilut* (emanation), *Beria* (creation), *Yetzira* (formation), and *Asiya* (making). In some systems, *Atzilut* is the first cosmic realm beyond and apart from the *Ein Sof*. Within various systems, the ten *Sefirot* are understood to function within these worlds or are the worlds themselves, although not all kabbalists agree on the elements of this theory. Some, such as *Nefesh ha-Hayyim*, appear to distance these worlds from the Divine essence. Others such as Ibn Gabbai or at least some of his sources seem to understand the worlds as closer and maybe even identical to the Divine essence. For a brief Lurianic interpretation see R. Hayyim Vital, *Sha’arei Kedusha* (Eshkol, 1985), 3:1, 69–74, and also Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Schocken Books, 1974), 272. Regarding the question of if the worlds or *sefirot* are part of the Divine
and Tzimtsumin. It is most unlikely that any Kabbalist ever ventured to maintain, as Professor Heschel does, that “events and human actions arouse in Him joy or sorrow, pleasure or wrath” (95).

Berkovits uses the Nefesh ha-Hayyim of R. Hayyim of Volozhin, the student of the Vilna Gaon, to refute Heschel.

Most illuminating on this point is the teaching of the author of Nefesh Ha-Chayim. In keeping with kabbalistic principles he maintains that, because of the manner in which the various worlds of creation, the highest and the lowest, are connected with each other, all human action produces corresponding effect on high. Human failure is, therefore, a destructive action in “all the worlds” and is the cause of sorrow “on high.” It is the task of man, when he approaches God in prayer, to think of the sorrow of the heavens over his failure, rather than his own tribulations. However, the term used is usually “the sorrow on high,” but never feeling “the pain of God” (96).

For Berkovits, Heschel is out of bounds in the rationalist field and even from his “home court” of the Jewish mystical tradition. Following the midrashic tradition, the kabbalists allow for impact “on high” but not God’s essence. Berkovits points out that the divine realm may be viewed from two vantage points: the divine essence and the post-tzimtzum reality after atzilut or emanation. From the divine essence vantage point, God is impassible, and nothing can be expressed about the Divine. Berkovits maintains that for Heschel, even the divine essence can be impacted by man’s actions. Here he suggests Heschel runs afoul of the kabbalists. Berkovits claims that kabbalistic sources do not view the divine essence as passible, that it does not experience feeling and suffering, while Heschel does. Furthermore, he assumes that kabbalistic systems are monolithic and consistent.67 He also seems to believe that the kabbalistic interpretation of Judaism is novel, “some of the most characteristic insights of the Kabbalah are . . . familiar from gentile sources . . . [and] gnostic ideas.”68 He suggests that Heschel goes beyond the kabbalists: “it is most unlikely that any Kabbalist ever ventured to maintain, as

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68 Berkovits, “What is Jewish Philosophy?,” 124.
Professor Heschel does, that ‘events and human actions arouse in Him joy or sorrow, pleasure or wrath.’” Each one of these assumptions, Heschel would argue, is mistaken.

Heschel, who perceived Judaism on a continuum of biblical, rabbinic, and kabbalistic thought, seems ahead of his time. Unlike Berkovits, he did not see the kabbalistic theology as a foreign import but as a legitimate understanding of Judaism. Kimelman suggests “more and more scholarship has gnawed away at the pillars of the thesis that Kabbalah is a foreign import. . . . Frequently, the perception of discontinuities in historical research is due to a lack of data. As more and more data is uncovered, so grows the perception of continuity.”69 Heschel saw his project as viewing kabbalistic notions as built on the rabbinic and biblical tradition.70

Heschel was not only the scion of a Hasidic dynasty but one of the most well-rounded Jewish thinkers in the twentieth century. “He contributed to . . . most of the fields within Jewish studies: Bible, Rabbinic thought, medieval philosophy, Polish Hasidism. In a way, the entire continuum of Jewish thought—philosophical and mystical—attracted him, and he contributed original scholarship to each of them.”71 Despite such a vast array of sources under his belt, he relied on particular texts. Arthur Green describes his experience with his teacher. I believe within this personal passage rests an essential element in understanding Heschel’s entire project.

Heschel gave me the huge assignment . . . of reading through Rabbi Meir ibn Gabbai’s ‘Avodat ha-Kodesh a sixteenth-century kabbalistic summa, and writing a paper on it. . . . I came to realize that Gabbai’s main theme, that our worship fulfilled a divine, and not just a human, need, was the key to Heschel’s own philosophy, indeed encapsulated by the phrase God in Search of Man, title of his theological magnum opus. In giving me Gabbai, he had in a sense offered to me the key with which to open the treasure house of his own understanding of Judaism.72

Green’s recollection that Heschel saw his own philosophy-theology encapsulated in Meir ibn Gabbai’s Avodat ha-Kodesh fits other information we know about Heschel’s approach to Kabbalah. As Idel noted, Heschel seems to have had the entire corpus of Jewish sources at his fingertips. Yet,

69 Kimelman, “Heschel’s Theology of Judaism,” 216.
72 Arthur Green, Judaism for the World (Yale University Press, 2020), 309; emphasis added.
when looking back at his summary of Jewish mysticism, one is struck by the choices of texts to include. In an early essay on Jewish mysticism, published in 1949 (between the publication of his dissertation and the English edition of The Prophets), Heschel quotes primarily from the Zohar. Reuven Kimelman relates that “in the late 1960’s [Heschel’s] biweekly seminar on Jewish thought dealt at times with Kabbalah and Hassidism. The books included Meir ibn Gabbai, Avodat HaKodesh; Isaiah Horowitz, Shnei Luhot HaBrit; Sefer Ba’al Shem Tov; and Nahum of Tchernobyl, Me’or Einayim.” Unlike many modern writers, when describing that kabbalistic or mystical view of Judaism, he chose works that preceded Isaac Luria.

The index to the newly published Hebrew edition of Torah min ha-Shamayim also confirms the importance of Ibn Gabbai to Heschel’s thought. In this work focusing on the rabbinic tradition, he cites the Zohar extensively as well as the aforementioned bibliography cataloged by Kimelman. We see a different picture when it comes to the three sources cited by Berkovits: R. Hayyim Vital, Ramhal, and R. Hayyim of Volozhin. Heschel quotes R. Vital’s works a handful of times, but he only footnotes the works of Ramhal twice and Nefesh ha-Hayyim just once. In other words, the texts used as kabbalistic sources for Berkovits, were simply not central to Heschel’s worldview. Earlier sources play a more central role in his understanding of Judaism. Therefore, it makes sense to examine the writings that Heschel viewed as critical to Jewish theology: Avodat ha-Kodesh of Rabbi Meir ibn Gabbai and the Shenei Luhot ha-Berit of R. Isaiah Horowitz.

Ibn Gabbai (sixteenth century) was a kabbalist writing half a generation before Rabbis Moses Cordovero and Isaac Luria. In his work, he summarizes the writings of many earlier kabbalists. R. Horowitz (1555–1630) is probably more well-known in broader rabbinic circles; however, he quotes ibn Gabbai extensively.

One of the critical themes in Avodat ha-Kodesh, based on Talmudic principle, is “worship is a necessity of the Divine.” As he sums up the first section of his work:

The first chapter explains that worship is of Divine necessity according to the Kabbalah and to hint that that Hasidim have the power to bring

down Divine will, and we will show that Hasidim have to the power to add strength to the On High, etc.\textsuperscript{75}

For Ibn Gabbai, humans can impact the Divine. He repeats this notion numerous times throughout the section. Berkovits seems aware of this, as we saw above, saying, “Man’s actions, according to the Kabbalah do have an effect in the ‘higher world,’ but not on God Himself. If there is pathos in the system of Kabbalah, it is certainly below the world of \textit{Atzilut}, in the realms of creation” (95).

But this is not so. Ibn Gabbai himself declares, “the worship of prayer is greater than sacrifices as is taught in \textit{Berakhot 32b} . . . and the essence in them is intention [\textit{kavvana}] and through proper [\textit{kavvana}] the levels connect one to the other [all the way up to] the \textit{Ein Sof} [divine infinitude].”\textsuperscript{76} “And when the priest sacrifices and applies the correct intention, he unifies and brings close all the energies in (or of) the \textit{Ein Sof} and blessing spreads throughout the [lower] worlds.” Similarly, he states, “Given that this worship is unifying all unto the \textit{Ein Sof}, it is a fixing [\textit{tikkun}] of the Honor, and a need of the upper realm, and that is why He, blessed be He, asks this of Israel. And this is what it says, ‘and now, Israel, what does the Lord, your God ask of you, only to fear the Lord your God, and to walk in His ways’ (Deut. 10:12).”\textsuperscript{77}

Ibn Gabbai views Nahmanides and Rabbenu Bahya as his precursors. Indeed, Nahmanides, based on the Talmudic statement that sacrifices are “a need for above” (\textit{Yevamot 5b}), remarks,

But Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra explained [the verse to mean that] the purpose of My bringing them forth from the land of Egypt was only that I might dwell in their midst, and that this was the fulfillment of [the promise to Moses], “you shall serve God upon this mountain” (Exodus 3:12). He explained it well, and if it is so, there is in this matter a great secret. For in the plain sense of things, it would appear that [the dwelling of] the Divine Glory in Israel was to fulfill a need below, but it is not so.

\textsuperscript{75} Green, “God’s Need for Man,” 253, points out that in \textit{Torah min ha-Shamayim} Heschel seems to rely on Ibn Gabbai’s groundwork.

\textsuperscript{76} Section 2, chapter 4, 77 s.v. \textit{ve-anru}. See also Introduction, 4, 78, 82, s.v. \textit{veha-ish}, 83, s.v. \textit{ve-ra’iti}, etc. Despite R. Hayyim of Volozhin’s dualism, to use Brown’s term, the parallels to \textit{Nefesh ha-Hayyim}, chapter 3, are striking.

\textsuperscript{77} \textit{Avodat ha-Kodesh}, section 1, chapter 24, s.v. \textit{u-lefi}, 56. See also similar statements: Sec. 1, ch 20; sec. 2, ch. 22; sec. 4, ch. 15, and many others.
It fulfilled a need above, being similar in thought to that which Scripture states, “Israel, in whom I will be glorified.”

Dov Schwartz explains that according to Nahmanides, “worship is a ‘need of the Most High’ . . . . The celebrant’s intention when offering a sacrifice is not mere contemplation but possesses a clear-cut active dimension . . . such activity is unquestionably theurgic.” He compellingly argues that Nahmanides’ position that human acts can impact God became the dominant theory in certain Jewish intellectual circles. Ibn Gabbai follows this school, and *Shenei Luhot ha-Berit* quotes significant sections of *Avodat ha-Kodesh.* Unlike the sources Berkovits begrudgingly quotes, two of the mystical texts that most influenced Heschel’s way of thinking describe the pious person impacting the Divine and that the Shekhina needs the actions of the human beings. Earlier kabbalists such as Nahmanides and Rabbenu Bahya, building upon Talmudic interpretation of the Bible, serve as the foundation for this notion.

Ibn Gabbai, and by extension Isaiah Horowitz, repeat numerous times in their works that the mystical unification caused by the human action goes all the way up to the *Ein Sof.* For Ibn Gabbai, unlike for R. Hayyim of Volozhin, the *Ein Sof* is absolute Divinity,

For even the four-letter name, which is the unique name called the *Shem ha-Meforash,* is founded upon the glory of the created, which is *Atzilut* which is [pure] Divinity . . . but the sages of Kabbalah elevated It using the formulation “*Ein Sof*” to teach that He has no end and finitude nor beginning, and It is called the Root of roots and Cause of all causes and Prime Mover, to teach that He is the beginning and root and cause of all that was emanated from Him.

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80 *Shenei Luhot ha-Berit* (Israel, 1973), *Sha’ar ha-Gadol,* vol 1, 21a and ff.

81 See Charles Mopsik, *Les grands textes de la Cabale: Les rites qui font Dieu* [French] (Verdier, 1993), 340, n. 2. Brill points out that, “[Mopsik] notes the similarity of R. Hayyim to Ibn Gabbai on distancing the theurgy from the Ein Sof, but Mopsik does not mention that for R. Hayyim the worship does not affect God himself but only the providential forces below divinity.” Alan Brill, “Mithnagged Worship,” xvii, n. 56.

82 *Avodat ha-Kodesh,* sec. 1, ch 4, s.v. *ve-amar.*
For Ibn Gabbai, the *Ein Sof* is the Cause of all causes from which all emanated. Human actions impact the divine world up to the *Ein Sof*. This impact seems to occur in the world of *Atzilut* and perhaps even higher “up to the *Ein Sof*.”

Moshe Idel places Meir ibn Gabbai’s work squarely among “Kabbalistic treatises whose conception of the Sefirot is essentialist or copied from essentialist texts.” He continues, “the Sefirotic pleroma [realm of the divine emanations] is considered part of the divine essence, and *this is the peculiar domain where human activity influences the Divine*.”83 Indeed, the notion that some sort of symbiotic relationship of cause and effect between the human and divine, perhaps even the divine essence, appears in many sources.84 Idel suggests that several early works of this genre remain the only sources of ancient rabbinic midrashic traditions. The implication is that the kabbalistic notions of this school can be traced back to rabbinic sages. Ibn Gabbai uses many terms including, “Making God” based on earlier kabbalistic strands. Idel adds that “the deployment of the pleroma is a function of human activities which are responsible for the welfare of the revealed facet of Divinity and indirectly the entire world.”85 For this school of kabbalists, humans can impact the divine essence or close to it. While Berkovits and others reject this approach, Heschel interpreted Jewish tradition through this lens.

This phrasing, that human activity can impact the world of *Atzilut*, is absent from *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* who views the *Ein Sof* as completely unapproachable.

However, the context of blessing Him, the intention is not [aimed] towards the Essence (so to speak) of the One Master (never! never!), for He is far, far above any blessing. Rather the context is stated that the Holy One is [both] revealed and hidden. For the Essence of the *Ein Sof* is the most hidden of the hiddens. . . .

Though the Zohar refers to Him (blessed be He) with the name *Ein Sof*, it is not a descriptive name for Him. Instead, the intention is relative to how we perceive Him, from the perspective of the forces that are affected by Him via his purposeful relationship with the worlds. And for this reason, He is referred to as “Without End” and not “Without Beginning,” for in truth from the perspective of His Essence (blessed be His name) He has no end and no beginning.86

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83 Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 188.
86 *Nefesh ha-Hayyim*, Sha’ar 2, ch. 2.
Unlike Ibn Gabbai, for R. Hayyim, even the Ein Sof is not pure divinity. The break between pure Divinity and the Ein Sof and man’s impact on the upper realms is reflected in the terms employed by each thinker. R. Hayyim, instead of discussing unifying “up to the Ein Sof” or “in the Ein Sof,” as Ibn Gabbai and Horowitz do, uses terms like “unifies all the worlds.” If he does use terms like “when Israel performs improper actions it is as if they weaken God’s power, and when they perform proper actions, they add force and power to the Holy One,” it is usually in direct quotes of the Zohar. Berkovits focuses on the wording of Nefesh ha-Hayyim; however, Heschel was influenced by a different strand of Kabbalah, what Moshe Idel refers to as “essentialist,” which understands that man can impact on a much deeper level up to or close to the divine essence.

Where did these medieval thinkers derive the notion of human impact on the Divine? Modifying Scholem’s assumptions that mystical thought is a foreign import, which appears to have influenced Berkovits, Idel points out that, “such experts in texts as R. Abraham ben David, Nahmanides, or R. Solomon ben Abraham ibn Aderet [Rashba] can hardly be described as naive thinkers who would accept, as the mystical core of Judaism, traditions that were in principle unrelated to it.”87 Kimelman suggests, “following a Nachmanidean reading, Heschel underscores the continuity between biblical-rabbinic and kabbalistic-Hasidic perspectives.”88 Indeed, the sources Berkovits asked Heschel to produce, demonstrating that the human can impact the Divine, for Heschel, were in plain sight.89

Ibn Gabbai, perhaps like many other kabbalists, presents a complex portrait. On the one hand, the divine essence before Atzilut is completely unchanged-other. On the other hand, human activity can impact up to the Ein Sof—or seemingly close to the divine essence. The rabbinic idea of Shekhina creates a bridge to the divine essence. I believe this is why Heschel discussed the notion of Shekhina when addressing the teacher’s conference quoted above, “actually, the idea of Pathos, which I consider to be the central idea in prophetic theology, contains the doctrine of Shekinah . . . without an understanding of the idea of Shekinah we fail completely to understand the field of Jewish theology or the theme of

88 Kimelman, “Heschel’s Theology of Judaism,” 220.
89 Green, “God’s Need for Man,” argues compellingly that “a major piece of Heschel’s effort in Torah min ha-Shamayim is an attempt to trace the controversy of Maimonides and Nahmanides about Divine need for worship . . . back to Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Akiva,” 253.
God in search of man which I consider to be the summary of Jewish theology.”

Sometimes Heschel seems to suggest that pathos touches on God’s essence. In *Torah min ha-Shamayim*, Heschel presents the position of Rabbi Akiva, which seems to go even beyond the interpretation of the prophets,

> The participation of the Holy and Blessed One in the life of Israel is not merely a mental nod, a measure of compassion born of a relationship to God’s people . . . the participation of the Holy and Blessed One is that of total identification, something that touches God’s very essence God’s majestic being. As it were [kirvakhol], the afflictions of the nation inflict wounds on God.⁹⁰

There are two elements worth mentioning. Heschel introduces the radical statements of R. Akiva in the section about the Shekhina and uses the term “kirvakhol.” As Held points out, “Rabbi Akiva goes further than any prophet (not to mention Heschel himself) would have dared.”⁹¹ These two points indicate that even where the rabbinic texts push towards a more essentialist reading—like Ibn Gabbai—Heschel appears more cautious. He refrains from suggesting a theology touching on God’s essence. Whereas Berkovits rejects the kabbalistic framing of Jewish thought, Heschel tempers it.

Heschel’s ancestor, Reb Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, and other Hasidic thinkers suggest that man impacts God and can even change the divine mind. The Talmud says, “The God of Israel has spoken, the Rock of Israel said concerning me: ‘He who rules men justly [tzaddik], he who rules in awe of God’ (II Samuel 23:3). Who rules Me? The tzaddik. God decrees a decree, and tzaddikim nullify them (Mo’ed Katan 16b).”⁹² R. Levi Yitzhak explains,

> In every generation, [tzaddikim] have the power to change the thoughts of God, as it were. We discover, as it were, God does not control Himself, according to His will, and everything is not done according to His will. Rather, God is controlled by the tzaddikim in every generation.

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⁹² Note the lack of “as it were [kirvakhol]” in the Talmud’s version.
According to their will, all is done, even counter to the will of God . . . and the tzaddikim have the power to change the decrees of God.\footnote{Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, Kedushat Levi ha-Shalem, Derush le-Purim, s.v. ba-layla ha-hu. See Green in the next note, 71. He suggests that for Heschel, the true ability of the tzaddik to change the Divine decree was the ability to reinterpret the Torah.}

If, as some have said, Heschel was recasting Hasidut for moderns,\footnote{Arthur Green, “Abraham Joshua Heschel: Recasting Hasidism for Moderns,” Modern Judaism 29:1 (2009), 62–79.} then the words of his forebear leap out as a confirmation that God’s will changes, that humans know the divine will, and can impact it. How far does this impact reach? According to the essentialist school, like Meir ibn Gabbai, all the way up to the Ein Sof.

Turning to Hasidic texts, the notion of God’s care and concern for the world and that humans can know this concern seems relatively common. In a passage that appears in a few early Hasidic texts, the Ba’al Shem Tov discusses human knowledge of the divine will:

“Know what is above you” (Avot 2:1). It is written, “Serafim [angles of fire] stand above Him,” etc. (Isaiah 6:2). The explanation is as follows: the fiery angels that stand [above] are the righteous [tzaddikim]. In their hearts burns fire for God. This is because “they are above him,” in the manner of “know what is above you.” You should know that man is a portion of Divinity on high. When man connects his thoughts above, he can know what happens above. For all that happens above, passes through his thoughts. As Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai says, “I am a sign in the world,” that is all the character traits which are evoked above are evoked below in the righteous [tzaddik], and this is the explanation of Serafim standing above him.\footnote{Sefer Ba’al Shem Tov ha-Shalem (Makhon Hadrat Hen, 2015), 2.745.}

In this challenging passage, the Ba’al Shem Tov seems to say that true tzaddikim, who are connected to God through love in their hearts, can know what happens even in the realm of the throne of God—which is the subject of Isaiah’s vision. Is the ability of the righteous to “know what happens above” in the throne of glory the same as Heschel’s prophetic sympathy? Suggesting that tzaddikim have access to such knowledge as described by the Ba’al Shem Tov seems similar to the notion that prophets know God’s indignation.
We also find in later Hasidut, much closer to the Warsaw of Heschel’s youth, thinkers who suggest that man can know what God desires. In his Sefat Emet, Reb Yehuda Arye Leib of Ger (1847–1905) writes:

On the verse, now I know that you fear God, there are those who asked, Abraham’s service was that of “love of God” which is higher than service out of fear. Why does the verse relate “fear God” to him? This was the test. . . . one who worships out of love, like Abraham, his heart and gut are drawn to do the will of God to the point that all his limbs naturally do the will of God . . . God’s desire was not to slaughter Isaac, and Abraham’s heart did not feel attachment [devekut] and love in this act—for indeed this was not God’s desire, and therefore it was a test—the verse says, “and he saw the place from afar” [“the place” can also be a name of God—meaning God was far from him]. His service was only out of “fear of God” given that [Abraham] did not doubt God. Therefore [Abraham] requested that he not be tested further—meaning that he should not feel distant [from God]—for the way of Abraham was the trait of love.96

The author of Sefat Emet questions how the text could call Abraham a “fearer” when he was known to be on the higher spiritual plane of “lover”? Sefat Emet responds that Abraham had an intuition of the will and desire of God. This will of God that Abraham knew to be correct, conflicted with the command to sacrifice his son. God did not “desire” the killing of Isaac, but God “commanded” Abraham to slaughter him. The actual test was the conflict between what Abraham felt or sensed as the divine will and the divine decree. One can understand that the prophet knows the divine command; however, how could Abraham know the divine desire? Abraham’s knowledge of the divine will corresponds to what Heschel means as pathos—Abraham possessed prophetic sympathy with God’s pathos—God did not want or desire the death of Isaac. Abraham could feel this. In this instance, a complicated twist of sympathy created the divine test. The similarity of Sefat Emet to Heschel’s ideas of pathos is striking.

Even in our thrice-daily prayers, something like Heschel’s notion of God caring for righteousness seems to jump off the page: “Blessed are Thou our God who loves righteousness and justice.” The sixteenth-century halakhist, R. Mordecai Yoffe (1530–1612) offers an explanation that fits with Heschel’s interpretation of divine care and the human response. “The meaning of ‘King who loves righteousness and justice’ . . . [is] the

96 Sefat Emet, Vayera 1881, s.v. ba-pasuk ata yadati.
King who loves that His creations act righteously and justly.” How can the prayer text indicate that the author knows that God “loves” and that the object of that love is humanity acting righteously? Heschel would suggest that this is one of the most fundamental claims of Jewish tradition.

These various texts show that the most natural reading of traditional Jewish sources influenced Heschel’s concept of divine pathos and human sympathy. Indeed, Heschel develops and expands these ideas in sophisticated new directions. He also needed to contend with the conflict between the finite human connecting to the infinite. Whether or not he ultimately succeeds in navigating this paradox is debatable. However, sufficient evidence demonstrates that Heschel’s theory of prophetic sympathy and understanding of the divine pathos is at home in traditional Jewish thought.

Berkovits admits that the notion of divine suffering of the Shekhina, if not the divine essence, has traditional Jewish sources:

> It is true that talmudic and midrashic tradition does speak of the Galut ha’Shekhina (cf. Megillah, 29a), the exile of the Shekhina; there is even a passage in the Talmud (Sanhedrin, 46a), which may indicate that the term Tzaar ha’Shekhina, the sorrow of the Shekhina, has a Mishnaic basis. However, the very fact that the term Shekhina is used, and not that of God, is in itself an indication how strangely rooted in the Jewish consciousness is the thought of God’s impassibility. In other places, where the Shekhina is not explicitly mentioned, anthropopathic expressions are introduced with the qualifying term kivyakhol, “as it were” (95).

Berkovits points out that many rabbinic and kabbalistic texts utilize the phrase “as it were” or “kivyakhol” in Hebrew when discussing anthropomorphisms. Nevertheless, the implication of the appearance of the term is not clear. As Michael Fishbane explains, “because of inconsistencies in parallel versions, and the ongoing impact of scribal practices and pieties into the Middle Ages . . . it is not always possible to determine the authentic exempla of the term kivyakhol or estimate the precise stratification of the evidence.” As seen above, in Mishna Sanhedrin 6:5, every possible variant reading exists including one with “Shekhina” without the word “kivyakhol.” But even where it does appear, it remains unclear what the term means. (It is not even clear how to pronounce it.)

97 Levush Mordecai, Orah Hayyim 582:2.
98 See Held, The Call of Transcendence, 183, n. 153, quoting Maurice Friedman, “Heschel was fully aware that he had not fully solved the problem of anthropomorphism—and he did not wish to.”
One common interpretation stems from the comment of Rashi (Yoma 3a), who states, “as though it were of one of whom you could say this.”\textsuperscript{100} This interpretation supports Berkovits’ contention that \textit{kivyakhol} limits the literalness of statements: “It is as if you could say this—but it is not truly so.” However, other medieval commentators read the statement differently. For instance, Rabbi Yom Tov ben Avraham Assevilli (Ritva, c. 1260–1320) expounds and changes the meaning of Rashi’s comment, “but because it is written in scripture, it is possible to say it.”\textsuperscript{101} Fishbane understands Ritva to be suggesting that \textit{kivyakhol} not only does not limit the statement but rather permits one to say a radical theological idea because it has scriptural support. A similar suggestion can be found in one of the texts Heschel often referenced, the \textit{Shenei Luhot ha-Berit}, which quotes the north African Rabbi Yeshua ben Yosef of Tlemcen’s fifteenth-century \textit{Halikhot Olam}:

The Torah, which was given with 22 letters, can say such a thing—but we cannot [say such a radical statement on our own]. Alternatively, \textit{Kaf Bet} [\textit{gematria} of 22] is an acronym for “written in the Torah” (\textit{katuv ba-Torah}) as the rabbis say in multiple places, “if not for the Torah text, the mouth could not utter the idea,” and so too I have seen in Tosafot to Megilla.\textsuperscript{102}

Fishbane interprets the quote, “the term is said to indicate that the content may be condoned because it is grounded in scripture itself.”\textsuperscript{103} Far from rejecting or modifying the theological notions suggested in such phrases as the suffering of the \textit{Shekhina}, the phrase “\textit{kivyakhol}” could be interpreted to support a more radical understanding that “we are permitted to say that the \textit{Shekhina} [or God in some texts], indeed, suffers.”

Assuming the original author included the term, a further possible understanding of such a disclaimer is that it functions as a polemic. It is unclear if the author was taking preemptive rhetorical measures against accusations of heresy or over-usage of anthropopathic terminology. Three possibilities exist: the original author did not include the phrase, wrote it and meant it, or wrote it but did not mean it literally.

The complexity of the usage and unclear meaning of the term seems to vitiate the argument that the term’s existence in some texts rejects a

\textsuperscript{100} Rashi to Yoma 3b, s.v. \textit{kivyakhol}, as translated by Israel Abrahams in Efraim E. Urbach, \textit{The Sages} (Magnes Press, 1979), 709, n. 1. Urbach prefers this definition.

\textsuperscript{101} Ritva, ad loc.

\textsuperscript{102} \textit{Shenei Luhot ha-Berit}, Torah \textit{she-be-al Peh}, 13b.

\textsuperscript{103} Fishbane, 328.
more literal reading. The fact that the term is absent from many texts or 
may be a later scribal addition opens the door for a more literal reading of 
the suffering of the Shekhina in rabbinic and kabbalistic tradition. 

Berkovits might concede that one may interpret many of the texts 
as does Heschel; however, he would argue that Heschel takes them too 
far. Berkovits claims that, “Man’s actions, according to the Kabbalah do 
have an effect in the ‘higher world,’ but not on God Himself. If there 
is Pathos in the system of Kabbalah, it is certainly below the world of 
Atzilut” (96). Berkovits accuses Heschel of suggesting that humans can 
impact God in a way that the kabbalists would not. This accusation does 
not match the evidence. 

Even considering Ibn Gabbai, Heschel seems to agree that human 
impact on the Divine is limited. As Green spells out, “Heschel is no kab-
balist; he does not want to say in coarse or simplistic way that the mitzvot 
fulfill a divine need. But he does want to say that human actions done in 
holiness, deeds that seek to fulfill God’s will in this world, are an infinite 
source of blessing to God and to the world.”104 Green quotes Heschel to 
support this less theurgic approach,

Piety, finally, is allegiance to the will of God. . . . A pious man’s thoughts 
and plans revolve around this concern, and nothing can distract him or 
turn him from the way . . . in this way, he feels that whatever he does, 
he is ascending step by step a ladder leading to the ultimate. In aiding 
a creature, he is helping the Creator. In succoring the poor, he fulfills 
a concern of God. In admiring the good, he reveres the spirit of God. 
In loving the pure, he is drawn to Him. In promoting the right, he is 
directing things toward His will.105 

The echoes, both in language and meaning, of Hasidic works like 
the Tanya leap out of this passage.106 Heschel reorients the discussion 
from one of clinging to God and mirroring the Divine through mitzva 
performance of a more general nature towards those focused on helping 
others in society. 

Even if one accepts Berkovits’ reading of midrashic and kabbalistic 
sources, and rejects the “essentialist” kabbalists, Heschel does not seem 
to cross Berkovits’ red lines despite the many challenges presented above.

104 Green, “Recasting Hasidism For Moderns,” 75. 
105 Heschel, Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion (JPS, 1941), 294, as cited 
in Green, “Recasting Hasidism for Moderns,” 79. 
106 See Tanya, introduction to Hinnukh Katan, “a person is called a journeyman 
[mehalekh] and not one who stands still. He must walk [up] step by step.”
Berkovits claims that the common notion of the suffering *Shekhina* differs from Heschel’s understanding of sympathy with the divine pathos.

It would be a misunderstanding to compare [prophetic sympathy] to the idea that one should feel the *Tzaar ba'Shekhina*, so widely spread in all Hasidic literature. On the basis of what has been said about pathos in Kabbalah, it should be obvious that it is not possible to equate “the sorrow of the *Shekhina*” with Heschel’s “pain in the heart of God.” The sympathy called for is with a finite manifestation of the divine in the world of creation. It is not sympathy with God, but, as it were, with the cause of God in the world (96).

However, Berkovits seems to be stretching Heschel’s reading too far. Heschel repeatedly addressed the impossibility of making claims about God’s essence. The prophet is only describing the divine relationship. In the address to schoolteachers, Heschel expressed that the role of the *Shekhina* in rabbinic and subsequent kabbalistic literature can only be understood as a metaphor for the way God communicates His care and concern for the world.

Let me mention another idea that is missing, because it is so Hellenized. This is the idea of Shekinah . . . . Without the idea of God in search of man, the whole idea of Shekinah is not even intelligible. . . . Actually, the idea of Pathos, which I consider to be the central idea in prophetic theology, contains the doctrine of Shekinah . . . . May I say, however, that without an understanding of the idea of Shekinah we fail completely to understand the field of Jewish theology or the theme of God in search of man which I consider to be the summary of Jewish theology.107

Heschel links the notion of the *Shekhina* to the idea of divine pathos. As discussed in the context of Ibn Gabbai, in kabbalistic systems, the *Shekhina* is the mechanism God uses to manifest His will in the world. Heschel seems to allude to the idea that the bridge between the Absolute and the finite runs through the rabbinic and mystical notion of the *Shekhina*. Therefore, Heschel dedicated an entire section in *Torah min ha-Shamayim* to the concept of the *Shekhina*—the precise section of that book where he discusses divine pathos.

Did Heschel go too far in taking midrashic and kabbalistic ideas literally? Does pathos and the prophetic sympathy imply a crossing of the boundaries beyond acceptable discourse? Heshel’s writing does not support such a reading. He is aware of and admits the limitation of metaphor.

107 *Moral Grandeur*, 156.
The error in regarding the divine pathos as anthropomorphism consisted of regarding a unique theological category as a common psychological concept. This was due to the complex nature of prophetic language, which of necessity combines otherness and likeness, uniqueness, and comparability, in speaking about God. . . . Regarded as a form of humanization of God, the profound significance of this fundamental category is lost.108

Pathos and its corollary, sympathy, are theological categories explaining uniquely prophetic notions of how the prophet intuits the divine will. However, the analogy is imperfect and, to some degree, a metaphor. Indeed, language is the problem. Emphasizing the poverty of human language to express this meaning and the danger of the prophets using anthropomorphic language, Heschel continues:

We must not fail to remember that there is a difference between anthropomorphic conceptions and anthropomorphic expressions. The use of the latter does not necessarily prove belief in the former. God has often been pictured in human form, or as having passions just like man’s. However, to picture Him as human does not mean to think of Him as human.109

Heschel is keenly aware that his presentation relies on the metaphoric language of biblical, rabbinic, and mystical traditions. Heschel repeatedly suggests that he is using the imprecise language of humanity.110 He wrote in several places that “we must not think that we reach God’s essence,”111 or “Revelation means not that God makes Himself known, but that He makes His will known; not God’s disclosure of His being, His self-manifestations, but a disclosure of the divine will and pathos, of the ways in which He relates to Himself to Man.”112 As Held points out, “note carefully that pathos is not God’s being or self-manifestation, but rather an aspect of God’s relationship to humanity.” Which leads Held to question Berkovits, “in light of everything we have just seen, it is difficult to make sense of Eliezer Berkovits’s blistering condemnation of Heschel’s discussion of divine pathos as hopelessly and inexcusably literalistic.”113

108 The Prophets, 270.
109 Ibid., 271. This sounds a bit like Berkovits himself, “There is no way for man to understand anything except in terms of his finite humanity”; Berkovits, “What is Jewish Philosophy,” 127.
110 See Held, The Call of Transcendence, 156, on this point.
111 The Prophets, 483.
112 Ibid., 485.
113 Held, The Call of Transcendence, 156.
Heschel’s claim that “the prophets never identify God’s pathos with His essence, because for them the pathos is not something absolute, but a form of relation” would seem to fit perfectly even with R. Hayyim of Volozhin’s theology. Our understanding of the Divine stems completely through divine relation to the world. There is nothing more radical here than that expressed in Nefesh ha-Hayyim. “And all the names based on relationship, physical descriptions, behavioral qualities and personality characteristics applied to Him (blessed be He) that we found in our holy Torah, all of them are expressed from . . . our perspective and the system that mandates our behavior, that being the perspective of His (blessed be He) relationship to the worlds.”114 Compare this to Heschel’s words, “the idea of the divine pathos is not a personification of God but an exemplification of divine reality, an illustration or illumination of His concern. It does not represent a substance, but an act or a relationship.”115

It is critical to note, however, that Heschel does not fit neatly into the “essentialist” mystical school. Indeed, unlike what Berkovits claimed, Heschel seems more conservative in his approach. In Arthur Green’s words, “Heschel is not a kabbalist possessed of the secret doctrine about how mitzvot influence the upper worlds . . . he can only go so far with Nahmanides and ibn Gabbai in their rejection of Maimonides’s philosophic God.”116 Far from over-emphasizing divine passibility, as Berkovits suggests, Green claims Heschel takes the rational-philosophic approach seriously and cannot wholly escape Maimonides. Berkovits’ critique seems to suggest Heschel is more cavalier in his rejection of philosophy than is reflected in Heschel’s writings.

If Berkovits can accept—or even forgive—rabbinic and kabbalistic authors for using the language of the suffering of the Shehkina, or the impact on high, or what he sees as borrowings from Gnostic sources, one wonders why he can’t be as charitable to Heschel who also warns about making claims about God’s inner life? This question takes on an even sharper edge when, as we saw earlier, Berkovits’ own theology seems not that far from that of Heschel.

Perhaps the division between Berkovits’ and Heschel’s approaches is even more straightforward. It comes down to one of the most contentious debates in Jewish thought and mysticism: namely, the debate regarding human ability to approach God. Can the finite approach the

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114 Nefesh ha-Hayyim 3:5.
115 The Prophets, 273.
116 Green, “God’s Need for Man,” 249.
infinite? The tension between how various Jewish thinkers, especially early Hasidic schools and their opponents, understood the concepts of divine transcendence and divine immanence is well documented. As Benjamin Brown has argued, various kabbalistic schools disagreed in their understanding of what Brown calls dualism. The notion that God is entirely and constantly immanent, argues Brown, is indicative of the early strata of Hasidim, namely, Beshtian Hasidut, and is not in consonance with the school of the Vilna Gaon, Ramhal, and R. Hayyim of Volozhin. Heschel seems to be describing a theology based on works such as *Avodat ha-Kodesh* as seen through the lens of early Hasidut and, even then, presents a modified approach wary of kabbalistic excess. That Berkovits prefers a Maimonidean, or at least rationalistic-philosophic formulation, of God, or alternatively a *Nefesh ha-Hayyim*-oriented interpretation, does not take away from Heschel’s thesis, rooted in Jewish tradition, that God presents His concern for humanity through acting in history.

Kimelman tantalizingly suggests that Heschel saw a dialectic throughout Jewish history between the schools gravitating more to the Maimonidean formulations and those pulled towards Nahmanides, as in the R. Yishmael and R. Akiva schools, discussed in *Torah min ha-Shamayim*. Berkovits prefers the former, whereas Heschel is more open to the latter. Or, as Green phrases it, “ultimately, Heschel is more drawn to—indeed needs—the God of Ramban and Ibn Gabbai, the God who is vulnerable and needy enough to be truly and irrevocably in search of man.”

Heschel seems to have oscillated between the two schools of interpretation, never entirely leaving Maimonides behind. “The dichotomy of transcendence and immanence is an oversimplification. For God remains transcendent in His immanence and related in His transcendence.” This ambivalence introduces a further difficulty in understanding Berkovits’ criticism. On the one hand, if Berkovits is right that Heschel’s allows for an interpretation that man can impact the divine essence, then Heschel’s

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120 Kimelman, “Heschel’s Theology of Judaism,” 219–220.
121 Green, “God’s Need for Man,” 257.
122 *The Prophets*, 485.
sources can be seen in the essentialist school of kabbalists tracing their roots back to Nahmanides’ understanding of Jewish tradition. Berkovits misinterpreted the kabbalistic tradition. On the other hand, he seems to suggest that Heschel is more essentialist than Heschel’s writings demonstrate. If so, Berkovits misunderstood Heschel. Either way, Heschel’s ideas find fertile ground in Jewish tradition.

Abraham Joshua Heschel presented a thesis in his earliest works, which he maintained throughout his life. The theology of divine pathos incorporates three interlacing aspects: that God cares about the world and relates that care; that the prophets, by their calling, must reach a level of sympathetic connection to that divine care; and that human agency can impact the divine relationship to the world by fulfilling His will. Heschel finds support for his notion of divine pathos and its accompanying aspects in biblical, rabbinic, medieval, kabbalistic, and Hasidic texts. Each of these works of literature describes the notion in its own idiom, but the general contours are similar if the theological language and structures vary.

R. Eliezer Berkovits critiqued Heschel for introducing what he felt was an overly anthropomorphic theology more akin to Christianity than Judaism. Berkovits’ main argument seems to be that Heschel abandoned medieval rationalistic-philosophic assumptions, which form the framework of Jewish thought. We have seen ample support for Heschel’s understanding of divine pathos in Jewish tradition. Berkovits in earlier works seems to have entertained similar theological approaches and understood them as stemming from tradition. Berkovits’ critique of Heschel, as the editors of Tradition argued in 1969, does not successfully push Heschel’s ideas of divine pathos, prophetic sympathy, and the impact of human actions out of bounds of traditional Judaism.