

The Wisdom of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

Rabbi Menachem Creditor

The Personal

[T]hat was precisely the sort of person my father was: filled with concern, at times trembling over the atrocities that filled the twentieth century, empathic to the worries of his family, students, and friends. He had a gift for listening and understanding, lifting the burdens from other people's hearts. (Dr. Susannah Heschel, Intro to *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Essential Writings*, 2011)

The Prophetic

There is immense silent agony in the world, and the task of man is to be a voice for the plundered poor, to prevent the desecration of the soul and the violation of our dream of honesty. The more deeply immersed I became in the thinking of the prophets, the more powerfully it became clear to me what the lives of the Prophets sought to convey: that morally speaking, there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings, that indifference to evil is worse than evil itself, that in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible. ("The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement", *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, 224-225)

To the prophet ... God does not reveal Himself in an abstract absoluteness, but in a personal and intimate relation to the world. He does not simply command and expect obedience; He is also moved and affected by what happens in the world and reacts accordingly. Events and human actions arouse in Him joy or sorrow, pleasure or wrath.... Quite obviously, in the biblical view, man's deeds may move Him, affect Him, grieve Him or, on the other hand, gladden and please Him. This notion that God can be intimately affected, that He possesses not merely intelligence and will, but also *pathos*, basically defines the prophetic consciousness of God. (The Prophets, Eng. 1962, 223–224)

[The prophet] is guided, not by what he feels, but rather by what God feels. In moments of intense sympathy for God, the prophet is moved by the pathos of God. (*ibid*, 34, 308–9, 319, 311, 314)

Prayer and Action

The problem is not how to revitalize prayer; the problem is how to revitalize ourselves. Let us begin to cultivate those thoughts and virtues without which our worship becomes, of necessity, a prayer for the dead—for ideas which are dead to our hearts.

We must not surrender to the power of platitudes. ...We must not take too seriously phrases or ideas which the history of human thought must have meant in jest, as for example, that prayer is "a symbol of ideas and values," "a tendency to idealize the world," "an act of the appreciation of the self." ... Prayer is not a need but an ontological necessity, an act that constitutes the very essence of man. He who has never prayed is not fully human.

The dignity of man consists not in his ability to make tools, machines, guns, but primarily in his being endowed with the gift of addressing God. It is this gift which should be a part of the definition of man. (*Man's Quest for God*, 77)

Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and to ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, falsehoods. The liturgical movement must become a revolutionary movement seeking to overthrow forces that destroy the promise, the hope, the vision. ("On Prayer," *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, 262-263.)

What is a mitzvah? A prayer in the form of a deed. And to pray is to sense His presence. 'In all thy ways thou shalt know Him.' Prayer

should be a part of all our ways. It does not have to always be on our lips; it must always be on our minds, in our hearts. (*Between God and Man*, 194)

Racial Justice

In several ways man is set apart from all beings created in six days. The Bible does not say, God created the plant or the animal; it says, God created different kinds of plants, different kinds of animals (Genesis 1: 11 12, 21-25). In striking contrast, it does not say, God created different kinds of man, men of different colors and races; it proclaims, God created one single man. From one single man all men are descended.

To think of man in terms of white, black, or yellow is more than an error. It is an eye disease, a cancer of the soul.

The redeeming quality of man lies in his ability to sense his kinship with all men. Yet there is a deadly poison that inflames the eye, making us see the generality of race but not the uniqueness of the human face. Pigmentation is what counts. The Negro is a stranger to many souls. There are people in our country whose moral sensitivity suffers a blackout when confronted with the black man's predicament.

How many disasters do we have to go through in order to realize that all of humanity has a stake in the liberty of one person; whenever one person is offended, we are all hurt. What begins as inequality of some inevitably ends as inequality of all. ("Religion and Race" (1963), *The Insecurity of Freedom*, 86-87)

The Fierce Urgency of Now

Here is the experience of a child of seven who was reading in school the chapter which tells of the sacrifice of Isaac on the way to Mt. Moriah, with his father. "He lay on the altar, bound, waiting to be sacrificed." My heart began to beat even faster; it actually sobbed with pity for Isaac. Behold, Abraham now lifted the knife. And now my heart froze within me with fright. Suddenly the voice of the angel was heard: 'Abraham, lay not your hand upon the lad, for now I know that you fear God.' And here I broke out in tears and wept aloud, 'Why are you crying?' asked the rabbi. 'You know that Isaac was not killed.' And I said to him, still weeping, 'But, Rabbi, supposing the angel had come a second too late?' The rabbi comforted me and calmed me by telling me that an angel cannot come late." An angel cannot be late, but man, made of flesh and blood, may be. ("A Prayer for Peace", *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, 232)

"When I see an act of evil, I'm not accommodated. I don't accommodate myself to the violence that goes on everywhere; I'm still surprised. That's why I'm against it, why I can hope against it. We must learn how to be surprised. Not to adjust ourselves." (1972 NBC Interview with Carl Stern)

The Purpose of Life

What is the meaning of my being? ...My quest - man's quest - is not for a theoretical knowledge about myself. ...Nor is it simply a striving to extend the length of my life span into an afterlife. What I look for is not how to gain a firm hold of myself and on life, but primarily how to live a life that would deserve and evoke an eternal Amen. It is not simply a search for certitude (though that is implied in it), but for personal relevance, for a degree of compatibility; not an anchor of being but a direction of being. It is not enough for me to be able to say "I am"; I want to know who I am, and in relation to whom I live. It is not enough for me to ask questions; I want to know how to answer the one question that seems to encompass everything I face: What am I here for? (Who is Man, 52-53)

This is the decision which we have to make: whether our life is to be a pursuit of pleasure or an engagement for service. The world cannot remain a vacuum. Unless we make it an altar to God, it is invaded by demons. This is no time for neutrality. ("No Time for Neutrality", *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, 75)

Remember, there is a meaning beyond absurdity, let [young people] be sure that every little deed counts, that every word has power, that we can do everyone our share to redeem the world. Despite of all absurdity and all the frustration and all disappointment. And above all, remember that the meaning of life is to build life as if it were a work of art. (1972 NBC Interview with Carl Stern)