

Heschel's Transformative Hasidism: Dialogical Transcendence

Heschel's memoir (quoted by his daughter, Prof. Susannah Heschel)

"I thought of my having walked with Hassidic Rabbis on various occasions. I felt a sense of the Holy in what I was doing. Dr. King expressed several times to me his appreciation. He said, 'I cannot tell you how much your presence means to us. You cannot imagine how often Reverend Vivian and I speak about you'... With sadness, my father adds, "I felt again what I have been thinking about for years – that Jewish religious institutions have again missed a great opportunity, namely, to interpret a Civil Rights movement in terms of Judaism.

Susannah Heschel, "Introduction", *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*

In his introduction of King to the audience, Heschel asked, "Where in America today do we hear a voice like the voice of the prophets of Israel? Martin Luther King is a sign that God has not forsaken the United States of America. God has sent him to us. His presence is the hope of America. His mission is sacred, his leadership of supreme importance to every one of us."...

In his address, King stated that Heschel "is indeed a truly great prophet." He went on, "here and there we find those who refuse to remain silent behind the safe security of stained glass windows, and they are forever seeking to make the great ethical insights of our Judeo-Christian heritage relevant in this day and in this age. I feel that Rabbi Heschel is one of the persons who is relevant at all times, always standing with prophetic insights to guide us through these difficult days".

Heschel, *A Passion for Truth*, Introduction, "Why I Had to Write This Book"

I was born in Warsaw, Poland, but my cradle stood in Mezbizh (a small town in the province of Podolia, Ukraine), where the Baal Shem Tov, founder of the Hasidic movement, lived during the last twenty years of his life. That is where my father came from, and he continued to regard it as his home... I was named after my grandfather, Reb Abraham Joshua Heschel – "the Apter Rav", and last great rebbe of Mezbizh. He was marvelous in all his ways, and it was as if the Baal Shem Tov had come to life in him... The Apter Rav claimed that his soul had lived in several incarnations, and for his descendants it was as if he had never died.

Enchanted by a wealth of traditions and tales, I felt truly at home in Mezbizh... It was in my ninth year that the presence of Reb Menahem Mendl of Kotzk, known as the Kotzker, entered my life. Since then he has remained a steady companion and a haunting challenge... Years later I realized that, in being guided by both the Baal Shem Tov and the Kotzker, I had allowed two forces to carry on a struggle within me... In a very strange way, I found my soul at home with the Baal Shem but driven by the Kotzker.

Was_it good to live with one's heart torn between the joy of Mezbizh and the anxiety of Kotzk? To live both in awe and consternation, in fervor and horror, with my conscience on mercy and my eyes on Auschwitz, wavering between exaltation and dismay? Was this a life a man would choose to live? I had no choice: my heart was in Mezbizh, my mind in Kotzk.

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The Baal Shem constantly reminds us how close God is to man and to all things. Reb Mendl perennially recalls how alienated, how estranged man is from Truth, from God. The Baal Shem discloses the presence of God, the Creator of the Universe, within the world; he brings Heaven nearer to man. But for what purpose, says Reb Mendl, since man's corruption spurns the Divine?... The Baal Shem taught that God was everywhere... Reb Mendl, however, felt that there was an essential disparity between the Divine and the mundane, that the human often operated in defiance of the Divine... When asked where God dwelt, the Baal Shem answered, everywhere; the Kotzker, where He is allowed to enter.

Heschel, "Hasidism as a New Approach to Torah", *Jewish Heritage* (1972), p. 37

What is the meaning of studying Torah? The Baal Shem asks... Learning is a means to an end. To study Torah, he says, means to sense that which transcends the Torah. When God created heaven and earth He created also a light... but because of the failure of creation... God hid that eternal light. Where did He hide it? He hid it in the words of the Torah. When the Besht read the words of the Torah, he was able to sense that light. He was able through that light to see everything that goes on in the world and beyond this world. Study, he also insisted, is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

What is the means, what is the end? The end is the person himself. There is a famous story of how man came to a rebbe for the first time in his life... The rebbe asked him, "what did you do all your life?" He answered, "I have gone through the Talmud four times". "How much of the Talmud has gone through you?" asked the rebbe.

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There is a story about a learned man who came to see the Kotzker. No longer young – he was close to thirty – the visitor had never before been to a rebbe. "What have you done all your life?" the master asked him. "I have gone through the whole Talmud three times," answered the guest. "Yes, but how much of the Talmud has gone through you?" Reb Mendl inquired.