

## **Abraham Joshua Heschel: Descendant of the Prophets**

### **Heschel's *The Prophets* – the dedication**

To the martyrs of 1940-45. "All this has come upon us, Though we have not forgotten Thee, Or been false to Thy covenant. Our heart has not turned back, Nor have our steps departed from Thy way... for Thy sake we are slain... Why dost Thou hide Thy face?" (from Psalm 44).

### **Heschel's *The Prophets* – the first lines of the Introduction**

This book is about some of the most disturbing people who have ever lived: the men whose inspiration brought the Bible into being, the men whose image is our refuge in distress, and whose voice and vision sustain our faith.

### **Carl Stern's Interview with Heschel, NBC, December 1972**

*Are you talking about a rebirth of their [the prophets] knowledge in the mouths of others, or is that not to be?*

No, I mean an identification. May I make a personal statement here. I've written a book on the prophets. A rather large book. I spent many years. And, really, this book changed my life. Because early in my life, my great love was for learning, studying. And the place where I preferred to live was my study and books and writing and thinking. I've learned from the prophets that I have to be involved in the affairs of man, in the affairs of suffering man. And I would like to say that one of the saddest things about contemporary life in America is that the prophets are unknown. There's a complete decline of the Bible in American education. No one knows the prophets. There are countless intellectuals, who may be great authorities on literature, who have never read the prophets, really, have never been touched by them. And this, I'm sorry to say, is a little bit of a disaster. The great examples we need today are the ancient prophets of Israel. I say that this book on the prophets which I wrote changed my life. And I think that anyone who reads the prophets will discover, number one, that the prophets really were the most disturbing people who ever lived. It's not easy to be a . . .

*Oh, you mean they were abrasive, when you say "disturbing?"*

Abrasive, disturbing, giving me a bad conscience.

*Well, are you a prophet? You've been abrasive at times, particularly concerning the Vietnam War. You've said a great deal about that.*

I won't accept this praise, because it's not for me to say that I am a descendant of the prophets, which is an old Jewish statement. It is a claim almost arrogant enough to say that I'm a descendant of the prophets, what is called B'nai Nevi'im. So let us hope and pray that I am worthy of being a descendant of the prophets.

### **The Prophets, The final sentences of Heschel's Introduction**

What drove me to study the prophets? In the academic environment in which I spent my student years philosophy had become an isolated, self-subsisting, self-indulgent entity, a *Ding an sich*, encouraging suspicion instead of love of wisdom. The answers offered were unrelated to the problems, indifferent to the travail of a person who became aware of man's suspended sensitivity in the face of stupendous challenge, indifferent to a situation in which good and evil became irrelevant, in which man became increasingly callous to catastrophe and ready to suspend the principle of truth.

I was slowly led to the realization that some of the terms, motivations, and concerns which dominate our thinking may prove destructive of the roots of human responsibility and treasonable to the ultimate ground of human solidarity. The challenge we are all exposed to, and the dreadful shame that shatters our capacity for inner peace, defy the ways and patterns of our thinking. One is forced to admit that some of the causes and motives of our thinking have led our existence astray, that speculative prosperity is no answer to spiritual bankruptcy. It was the realization that the right coins were not available in the common currency that drove me to study the thought of the prophets.

Every mind operates with presuppositions or premises as well as within a particular way of thinking. In the face of the tragic failure of the modern mind, incapable of preventing its own destruction, it became clear to me that the most important philosophical problem of the twentieth century was to find a new set of presuppositions or premises, a different way of thinking...

The prophet was an individual who said No to his society, condemning its habits and assumptions, its complacency, waywardness, and syncretism. He was often compelled to proclaim the very opposite of what his heart expected. His fundamental objective was to reconcile man and God. Why do the two need reconciliation? Perhaps it is due to man's false sense of sovereignty, to his abuse of freedom, to his aggressive, sprawling pride, resenting God's involvement in history. Prophecy ceased; the prophets endure and can only be ignored at the risk of our own despair. It is for us to decide whether freedom is self-assertion or response to a demand; whether the ultimate situation is conflict or concern.