

RABBI ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL, "RELIGION AND RACE" (14 JANUARY 1963)

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Abstract: Like Martin Luther King, Jr., Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel led many Jews, both clerical and lay, into action against racism, reaching beyond denominational and racial boundaries to lead for social justice. By invoking biblical texts and thematic concerns in common with African American rhetoric, he hoped to strengthen solidarity between Jewish Americans and African Americans, and to inspire Black Christians who had been reluctant to endorse the activism of leaders like King.

Key Words: Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Civil Rights Movement, Racism, Religion, Judaism

In her great anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe tells us about a Christian minister who supports slavery. The evil slave-holder Marie St. Clare praises "Dr. G----'s" sermon to her cynical, guilt-ridden husband:

The text was, 'He hath made everything beautiful in its season;' and he showed how all the orders and distinctions in society came from God; and that it was so appropriate, you know, and beautiful, that some should be high and some low, and that some were born to rule and some to serve, and all that, you know; and he applied it so well to all this ridiculous fuss that is made about slavery, and he proved distinctly that the Bible was on our side, and supported all our institutions so convincingly. I only wish you'd heard him.¹

Stowe makes Marie's moral bankruptcy so clear that we condemn anyone she praises. The content of the passage further discredits the minister's views by conveying them through Marie's obviously self-serving and intellectually vacuous account, fraught with vague "you know's" like any high school lunchroom airhead's.

Stowe's novel was published in 1852, and she accurately depicts the position of many mainstream Christian thinkers on the subject of slavery, although many others vigorously opposed it. Perhaps we are not surprised that religious leaders were so divided on the subject of slavery, at that time, ten years before the Civil War. As a result of the Civil War, slavery was abolished, and in the decades that followed, Americans of African descent gained increasing civil rights. Though this process is not complete even today, we are accustomed now to think

that any moral person would support full civil rights for every American. We imagine that religiously based support for discrimination disappeared at Appomattox, where the Civil War ended.

Yet, over one hundred years after Stowe's novel appeared, during the great upsurge of civil rights activism in the 1960s, religious opposition to the cause still existed. Religious justifications of racial discrimination had been relegated to the margins of society--although they could still be found, and can be found even today. But many mainstream clergy felt that combating racism was a political fight in which they should have no part. If they did not actively defend racial discrimination, they did not actively resist it either. The great Christian religious leader of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had to repeatedly make the argument that the Judeo-Christian tradition, properly interpreted, designated racism as a sin and therefore an evil that the clergy must address. As is well known, his activist stance was opposed by many Christian leaders.²

But King received strong support, both theological and personal, from a European-born Chasidic rabbi with a long white beard who specialized in the study of Jewish mysticism--seemingly, an other-worldly figure, highly unlikely to enter the political arena. This was Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, and in fact he became a major architect of the religious argument against racial discrimination, not only agreeing with King but actually helping him to develop his theology. Like King, Heschel too encountered opposition to his social activist stance from prominent religious leaders of his own faith.³ Nevertheless, his teaching and example led many concerned Jews, both clerical and lay, into action against racism, just as King inspired Christians. Indeed, both men reached beyond denominational and racial boundaries to lead for social justice.

The address published here was Heschel's first major public statement on the conflict between religion and racism, framed from a Jewish theological perspective. Thus it effectively refutes the view of historian Claybourne Carson, quoted by Murray Friedman, that "there was little evidence 'that Judaism as a set of religious beliefs has been associated with support [for] political reform, liberalism or racial tolerance.'"⁴ The address establishes themes that were to recur in other civil rights speeches Heschel gave over the next decade. It represents his first major push to overcome the apathy or distaste of religious people of all denominations, but Jews especially, for activism against racism. It lays out his theology justifying the religious critique of political issues. Moreover, it was delivered at the conference where he met King for the first time, and it launched their productive friendship. It is an important speech in the history of the struggle for full civil rights for all Americans, and more particularly, in the history of religion's impact on American public life.

Activism for Black Civil Rights in the Mid-Twentieth Century

As noted above, the struggle to attain full civil rights for American citizens of African descent has been on-going, since before the United States was established as an independent nation. While at times the struggle may have seemed to lie dormant, at other times it has

pushed forward with renewed vigor. Such a time of renewal occurred after World War II. The decades of the 1950s and 1960s saw a series of laws passed to remove various forms of racial discrimination, urged on both by peaceful political demonstrations and by race-based riots, and opposed by vigilante terrorism and police brutality. Since the late nineteenth century, Jewish Americans and African Americans had developed an alliance to work for civil rights, and it was especially vigorous during this period. Several of King's close advisors were Jewish, and Jews were represented among civil rights activists in numbers far beyond their percentage of the American population.⁵

The 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education* is often cited as the first important event in this mid-twentieth century struggle. This decision decreed that the widespread system of separate public schools for Black and White children was inherently unequal, and therefore unconstitutional. Of course, *de facto* if not *de jure*, segregated schools still exist in the United States even today, but an important principle was established and it has impacted on-going efforts to improve educational access for people of color. To get a sense of the other types of racial discrimination that existed in the early 1950s, take note of the agendas of the civil rights legislation that would be passed over the next two decades (summarized below).

A climate of resistance to racial discrimination was growing among African Americans. Rosa Parks, an ordinary citizen with no particular involvement in activism, simply decided one day in 1955 not to give up her seat on a public bus to a White person, as Southern custom dictated that she should do. The ensuing uproar is now thought by many to be an important catalyst in moving larger numbers of people of all races into activism against racism. Two years later, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. co-founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and became its first President, to lead non-violent protest against racism. The SCLC and other activist groups began to push against segregation laws and customs by deliberately entering "Whites only" establishments and schools. Among a number of test cases was that of James Meredith, who in 1961 became the first Black student to enroll in a previously all-White university, the University of Mississippi (prior to this, with a few exceptions such as Oberlin College, only all-Black institutions provided higher education to Black people). White riots opposing Meredith were quelled only when President John F. Kennedy sent 5000 Federal troops to campus.

In January of 1963, Christian and Jewish leaders met at a conference in Chicago, where Rabbi Heschel gave the address under analysis here. A few months later, in March, Dr. King found himself in jail in Birmingham, Alabama, after leading a civil rights protest there, and he penned his famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail," calling on the clergy and all persons of conscience to oppose racism and echoing some of the themes broached by Heschel.⁶ Many of the protesters he lead were injured when local police chief "Bull" Connor ordered the use of attack dogs and fire hoses against them. Striking more directly at King's call for Christian leadership in the fight against racism, someone bombed a Black church in Birmingham in September of that year, killing four little girls.

Finally, legislative victories began to come to the movement. In 1964, the 24th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution banned the imposition of poll taxes, which had been used to keep poor Blacks from voting. In July, President Lyndon Baines Johnson signed a sweeping Civil Rights Act banning all forms of racial discrimination (which, nevertheless, would need the support of further legislation). Meanwhile, two Jewish men and an African American man--Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney--were arrested in Mississippi on trumped-up charges, where they were helping Black voters to register, and then turned over by police to the Ku Klux Klan, a racist vigilante group who murdered them.

In the spring of 1965, King led a march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, to demonstrate for Black voting rights. Police used tear gas, whips and clubs against the marchers, injuring many. Heschel led protests in New York against this treatment and then, at King's invitation, joined this dangerous march himself (see below). Historians largely credit this march with motivating the U.S. Congress, in August of that year, to pass the Voting Rights Act, which removed various barriers to Black voting that had been erected in the South, such as spurious literacy tests. Even as Congress was meeting, race riots of unprecedented violence broke out in Watts, California, and similar though smaller conflagrations would erupt in other cities over the next few years. In September, President Johnson issued an Executive Order providing enforcement for affirmative action provisions in earlier legislation. These gains were followed in 1967 by a Supreme Court decision declaring unconstitutional the laws against inter-racial marriage that were still on the books in sixteen states; and in 1968 by a Civil Rights Act barring discrimination in the rental and sales of housing. This was the year in which King was assassinated, and Heschel suffered a major heart attack that finally claimed his life a few years later. By this time, protest against the Vietnam War had also become an important social movement--both King and Heschel were prominent in it--and the women's liberation movement was also gathering speed.

Heschel's leadership role in these great social movements was well known in his own day, and to contemporary scholars.⁷

Who was Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel?

Abraham Joshua Heschel was born in 1907 in Warsaw, Poland. His parents were Chasidim, that is, members of a particularly observant and spiritually intense Orthodox Jewish sect. Both came from families distinguished for rabbinic learning for many generations, and they intended young Abraham to follow in his ancestors' footsteps as a Chasidic "rebbe." This role would require great learning and profound spiritual depth, and the capacity to attain these was thought to pass genetically among families like Heschel's with long histories of producing influential rabbis. From early on, it seemed clear that Heschel had indeed inherited exceptional traits. He showed precocious ability studying the Talmud, that is, the lengthy and dense books of Jewish law and commentary on the Torah, the Jewish Bible. He even published his own Talmud commentaries at age 15. He was given smicha, that is, ordained as a rabbi, shortly thereafter. He was destined to be a leader among the Chasidim, not only for his prodigious

intellectual ability, but also for the spiritual charisma that he apparently possessed even as a child.

But Heschel resisted this destiny. While remaining faithful to the Orthodox lifestyle, he persuaded his family to let him pursue secular studies, first in Vilna, and then in Berlin, where he studied at both a secular university and a liberal rabbinical college. He received his Ph.D. in 1933 for a dissertation on the Hebrew prophets, and completed his studies at the rabbinical college in the following year. He published a book of poetry in Yiddish, a biography of Moses Maimonides, the great medieval rabbi, and, in 1935, his dissertation, which made his name as a scholar. In this work, Heschel advances the then-radical view that the Biblical prophets should not be seen as entranced conduits of God's word, scarcely knowing what they were saying, and in any case superseded by rabbinic Judaism and nascent Christianity. Rather they should be read as fully aware critics of the social injustices of their days, fully relevant to the social injustices of all times.⁸

Heschel's academic career in Germany was interrupted by the rise of the Nazis. He was deported back to Poland in 1938, fled to England, and then in 1940 found haven at Hebrew Union College, the American institution where Reform Jewish rabbis are trained. In 1945 he moved to the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City, where rabbis of the Conservative branch of Judaism are trained. Heschel was a beloved teacher who inspired many to incorporate traditional Jewish observance in modern life. At JTS he held a chair in Jewish ethics and mysticism. This combination was particularly appropriate to his theological interests: he argued that the immanent presence of God in the world, which the spiritual disciplines of traditional Judaism can make manifest, required and inspired humans to act for social justice. During the 1950s, he published several important books detailing these contributions to Jewish theology. The ancient Hebrew prophet was his role model, and after publishing an enlarged version in English of his book on the prophets in 1962, he came onto the national stage as an activist for several causes: for Jewish-Christian dialogue (he advised the Vatican as the important statement improving relations with Jews, Nostra Aetate, was being prepared); against the Viet Nam war (he was instrumental in persuading King to take a stand against this war); and especially, in support of African American civil rights.⁹ Invited to a meeting of religious leaders with President John F. Kennedy in 1963, Heschel first sent him a telegram about Black rights that asked the President to declare the present situation of inequality a "state of moral emergency" and to act with "high moral grandeur and spiritual audacity."¹⁰

In January of that year Rabbi Morris Adler, on behalf of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, organized the first national conference on religion and race, and asked Heschel to give the opening address.¹¹ The conference was timed to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation.¹² The result was the speech under analysis here. At this conference, Heschel met King, and they became good friends. "Martin Luther King is a sign that God has not forsaken the United States of America," said Heschel.¹³ He went to Selma, Alabama in 1965 to march with King in the dangerous civil rights demonstration noted above.¹⁴ He later wrote that he felt as if his "legs were praying" as he marched.¹⁵ King came to JTS to give an address in honor of Heschel's sixtieth birthday in which he acknowledged the rabbi's

help in mobilizing clergy of all faiths to act for civil rights. As noted above, their theologies had many points of similarity. His assassination prevented King from attending the Passover seder in Heschel's home in 1968.¹⁶ Heschel was the only Jew asked to speak at King's funeral service.¹⁷ He suffered a massive heart attack shortly thereafter, from which he never completely recovered, although he continued to teach and write. He died in 1972.

Heschel contributed in many ways to oral and visual dramatizations of activism. His fluent, eloquent, Yiddish-accented English and his diminutive stature, long white beard, and wild white hair, made him a media-friendly image of the activist Jew, as seen in the iconic photographs accompanying this essay, one taken at the 1965 Selma march (the marchers are wearing leis bestowed on them by the Hawaiian delegation) and one taken at an anti-war demonstration in 1968. According to Franklin Sherman:

Even in his physical appearance conjuring up the image of what an Amos or an Isaiah must have look liked--stocky, full-bearded, speaking softly but with passionate intensity--it is small wonder that many viewed him as a latter-day Hebrew prophet.¹⁸

Many of his fellow activists called him "Father Abraham," a name with both Jewish and African American resonance.¹⁹

Jewish Religious Ideas in "Religion and Race"

Heschel knew that his address would reach multiple audiences: first, the Jewish and Christian clergy and lay leaders, Black and White, who sat before him at Chicago; and second, all those people of various races and religions, or no religion, who would read the address when it was published. Bringing forward Jewish religious ideas, Heschel could hope to inspire the Jews in his audiences to act against racism (he seems to be thinking of an all-White Jewish community). Insofar as they respond to the Judeo-Christian religious tradition, he could hope to inspire White people who were not Jews to act against racism as well. Moreover, by invoking biblical texts and thematic concerns in common with African American rhetoric, he could hope both to strengthen solidarity between Jewish Americans and African Americans, and also to inspire Black Christians who had been reluctant to endorse the activism of leaders like King.

There are five major Jewish religious ideas in "Religion and Race," which occur in the following order: first, the special responsibility of Jews as former slaves, according to Torah history, to empathize with the oppression of African Americans; second, the need to avoid the particularly heinous sin of humiliating another person; third, the notion of collective responsibility for sin; fourth, the concept of each individual being created in the image of God; fifth, the urgent requirement to act on one's religious convictions.²⁰

Heschel reminds Jews and African Americans of their shared history of slavery and oppression in the opening words of his address:

At the first conference on religion and race, the main participants were Pharaoh and Moses. Moses' words were: "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, let My people go that they may celebrate a feast to me." While Pharaoh retorted: "Who is the Lord, that I should heed this voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and moreover I will not let Israel go." The outcome of that summit meeting has not come to an end. Pharaoh is not ready to capitulate. The exodus began, but is far from having been completed. In fact, it was easier for the children of Israel to cross the Red Sea than for a Negro to cross certain university campuses. (1-2)²¹

Heschel alludes here to the story in the Biblical book of Exodus about the Jews' enslavement in Egypt, from which God freed them by sending Moses to intervene with Pharaoh. This Exodus story has long been used in African American rhetoric to stand for the enslavement and oppression of Blacks by Whites in America, and to express Black hopes for liberation. By citing it, Heschel pays homage to this tradition and at the same time, turns it into a reminder that the original sufferers in the story were Jews--thus this rhetorical move identifies Jewish Americans and African Americans, if not as fellow people of color, then as fellow sufferers from situations in which their race, however defined, has been made the basis for oppressing them. This identification should stimulate impulses to solidarity from both groups. There is a more subtle dimension to this allusion, which also has antecedents in the tradition of African American oratory: an implied threat that if modern-day "Pharaohs" are no more unyielding than the Biblical ruler had been, they should fear Divine wrath in the form of miraculous intercessions on behalf of the oppressed, and at the oppressors' expense. Typically, Heschel quotes from the Bible and directly applies the quote to the present situation, thus cementing the common cause.

Heschel supplements his view of this broad canvas of collective liberation and retribution with a close-up look at how people relate to one another as individuals, addressing a second important Jewish religious idea in the second section of his speech. He says: "there is a deadly poison that inflames the eye, making us see the generality of race but not the uniqueness of the human face" (15). Under the influence of this form of spiritual blindness, the racist inflicts upon another person what Heschel calls "a form of oppression which is more painful and more scathing than physical injury or economic privation. It is *public humiliation*" (22). The Jewish tradition places special emphasis on the heinousness of this sin. Indeed, as Heschel points out, the same word in Hebrew refers both to this sin and to murder. In analyzing it, Heschel extends it to participation in racist institutions; you are committing it if you patronize racially exclusive places, where the fiery rabbi says your "very presence [inflicts] insult" (22)! Note that this analysis indicts what we might call "passive racism," or racism perpetrated simply by not protesting the discrimination that one sees; this is the kind of passive racism among clergy and religious laypeople that both King and Heschel set themselves to combat.

Contemplation of sin leads Heschel in the third section of his speech to discuss the ways atonement may be made, and thus he arrives at a third important Jewish religious idea. In the Jewish tradition, the notion of collective responsibility is very important. "*Some are guilty, but*

all are responsible," Heschel emphasizes (48). For this reason, on the great Jewish day of atonement, Yom Kippur, penitential prayers are recited in the first person plural--"we have lied, we have committed adultery, we have done murder"--and so on. The penitent should consider that, even if he or she has not committed the particular sin mentioned, he or she surely has not done enough to prevent that sin from being committed by others, and so he or she bears some responsibility for its continuing to afflict the world. At this point in his talk Heschel anatomizes the ways in which White people excuse themselves from thinking about the collective sins of racism, for example by ignoring the problem, or by delegating it to the courts, or by exaggerating the progress already made. He wishes to drive his audience to the point where they can no longer neglect their responsibility, even if they have not personally committed any actively racist acts, and he concludes this section of the address by castigating above all the sin of "*indifference to evil*" (42). He calls upon all clergy, and indeed, all concerned citizens, to take on the role of the Biblical prophets who were passionate advocates for the oppressed. As noted above, this indifference or inaction was the particular civic problem--that is, religious people's evasion of their civic responsibility in political affairs--that Heschel needed to tackle here.

It is worth remembering in this connection that Heschel's great work of scholarship was a book on the Biblical prophets. He believed that the Hebrew prophets call the pious person to become an activist for the poor and oppressed, and he traced a similar imperative in the life of the great medieval rabbi Moses Maimonides. The prophet "Amos is his mentor," says Morton Fierman and especially Amos 5:24: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."²² Susannah Heschel has demonstrated that this verse constituted perhaps the most important point of connection between Heschel's and King's theologies, and moreover, that Heschel provided King's preferred translation of the verse.²³ It will be featured in the King Memorial being built on the National Mall in Washington D.C.²⁴ As is well known, King also often characterized himself as a Biblical prophet compelled by conscience to deliver his message, however offensive to others or dangerous to himself it might be; he hit this note in several of his speeches on the Vietnam War and in the last address he gave before his assassination, on behalf of striking sanitation workers in Memphis.²⁵

Sympathy for the oppressed, in Heschel's thought, as Robert McAfee Brown has explained, is actually a divine quality; God exhibits it perfectly, and humans imperfectly as they try to imitate the divine model. God longs for us to do so: Heschel remained firmly within the tradition of Chasidic thinking that sees human action as "completing" God or satisfying God's needs. This is a central concept in the Jewish mystical tradition called "Kabbalah."²⁶

In the fourth section of his speech, Heschel turns to the theological core of his argument, and the fourth important Jewish religious idea that he presents: the notion that each individual is made in the image of God. From the beginning of the speech, indeed, Heschel has emphasized that racism is blasphemy, and the basis for that view in Jewish theology is that when one insults another person--as for example by inflicting public humiliation, that heinous sin--one is in fact insulting God. Heschel says:

God is every man's pedigree. He is either the Father of all men or of no man. The image of God is either in every man or in no man...God's covenant is with all men, and we must never be oblivious of *the equality of the divine dignity* of all men. (60)

Heschel points out the special significance of the Hebrew word "tselem," which means "image." It is used in the Torah both to condemn the worship of man-made images and to require respect for all humans as divinely created images of God. Furthermore, precisely because the privileged social classes may have trouble recognizing the image of God in the disenfranchised, says Heschel, "The prophets have a bias in favor of the poor" (63). For the moral person who fully recognizes the Divine image in the face of every person, racist acts become unthinkable.

In the fifth and final section of his speech, Heschel introduces his fifth great theme, also an important Jewish religious idea: the necessity of action on behalf of the oppressed. Traditional Judaism provides meticulous directions for how to conduct a variety of daily tasks in the most moral way possible, as well as requiring major endeavors to do "tikkun olam," that is, to make the world a better place. Heschel exhorts, "Let there be a grain of prophet in every man" (81)! He gives a particularly Jewish interpretation to this call: God has deliberately left creation unfinished, so that humans can be God's partners in completing it. Whereas God's task was to make the universe, ours is to shape history in a way that will be pleasing to God, that will, in fact, meet needs of God's that can be satisfied no other way:

The universe is done. The greater masterpiece still undone, still in the process of being created, is history. For accomplishing His grand design, God needs the help of man. . . . God needs mercy, righteousness; His needs cannot be satisfied in space, by sitting in pews, by visiting temples, but in history, in time. It is within the realm of history that man is charged with God's mission. (74)

Note that Heschel downplays the importance of traditional religious observance in houses of worship (although he was meticulous in all forms of Orthodox Jewish observance throughout his life). Thus, in effect, he attempts to ferret out those clergy who still think they can hide there from the moral imperative for social action that he is delivering.

To dramatize the form this action should take, Heschel concludes with his favorite Bible verse, Amos 5:24: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream" (88). Here is how he develops his final image:

A mighty stream, expressive of the vehemence of a never-ending, surging, fighting movement--as if obstacles had to be washed away for justice to be done. . . . Righteousness as a mere tributary, feeding the immense stream of human interests, is easily exhausted and more easily abused. But righteousness is not a trickle; it is God's power in the world, a torrent, an impetuous drive, full of grandeur and majesty. The surge is choked, the sweep is blocked. Yet the mighty stream will break all dikes. (89-90)

Even more explicitly than in his opening hints about the plagues sent to punish Egypt, here Heschel evokes images of overwhelming violence, "surging," "fighting," washing away all obstacles, breaking all barriers to equality and justice. Floodwaters are terrifying. To be sure, Heschel enlisted in King's program of non-violent resistance to racism, but Judaism is not naturally a pacifist religion, and Heschel comes very close here to calling for the sort of physical resistance advocated by some nineteenth-century abolitionists (William Lloyd Garrison is quoted in his introduction). Surely, it is a powerful concluding image.

Two years after he gave this speech, in March 1965, Heschel led a crowd of 800 people to the FBI headquarters in New York City to protest the brutal treatment that civil rights activists were receiving in Selma, Alabama. A few days later, King sent him a telegram inviting him to join their march, and he did so, leaving for Alabama at the end of Shabbat on Saturday evening, 20 March. Heschel walked with King at Selma, and due to the presence of Heschel and other Jewish leaders, "skullcaps became a symbol of the movement." Black leaders were wearing them, and "the demand for yarmulkes was so great that an order was wired for delivery of a thousand caps when the marchers would arrive in Montgomery."²⁷

Throughout his life, Heschel had many experiences with those who refuse to see the Divine image in the human face. About Nazi Germany, he wrote:

Emblazoned over the gates of the world in which we live is the escutcheon of the demons. The mark of Cain in the face of man has come to overshadow the likeness of God.²⁸

This was the blindness that Heschel sought to remove by his teaching, both in the classroom and on the street. Morton Fierman explains that "Heschel at all times too gives special prominence to the idea of the 'preciousness' of humanity."²⁹ This concept is based in Heschel's view of humans as united both in "being accountable to God" and in "being objects of God's concern, precious in His eyes."³⁰ Therefore, says Heschel, "When I hurt another human being, I injure God."³¹ Heschel hoped to arouse all Jews, all religious people, all good citizens to prevent such horrific injury.

The Importance and Relevance of Heschel's Ideas

Jacob Neusner is one of today's most learned American Jewish scholars of Bible and Rabbinics, and it is his opinion that "Abraham Joshua Heschel, 1907-1972, was the greatest religious thinker in Judaism, east or west, in the twentieth century and certainly the most profound and weighty theologian of Judaism ever to work in North America."³² Furthermore, Cornel West, one of today's most important African American theologians and activists, has called Heschel "a titan of justice in the twentieth century."³³ West confirms the judgment of scholars quoted above that Heschel profoundly influenced Martin Luther King, and West cites him as an influence on his own thinking as well. West praises Heschel as providing both

substantial ideas and spiritual inspiration for efforts by West and Rabbi Michael Lerner to rebuild a Black-Jewish alliance on behalf of civil rights for all people.

Heschel continues to garner such accolades because, tragically, the human problems addressed in his speech have not gone away. "Religion and Race" does not make policy recommendations, but it exhorts to a particular stance toward one's civic responsibilities that is arguably timeless. To be sure, people of African descent still do not enjoy freedom from discrimination in the United States. Moreover, many other groups also suffer from discrimination, making particularly apposite Heschel's observation that "In referring to the Negro in this paper we must, of course, always keep equally in mind the plight of all individuals belonging to a racial, religious, ethnic or cultural minority" who may also be suffering from discrimination (17). Heschel's ideas will remain relevant as long as people are unable to see the Divine image (or an image worthy of respect, if one prefers to avoid theological motivations) in the faces of their fellow humans.

Moreover, Heschel's concept that "some are guilty but all are responsible" seems particularly useful in today's era of special-interest-group activism. While many injustices remain to be corrected, early twenty-first century activism is fragmented into a wide variety of groups each with its own claim, clamoring for attention and showing little awareness of any responsibility for the concerns of other groups--much less demonstrating any willingness to make common cause among them. Heschel was one of the twentieth century's most important thinkers who bridged such gaps. In addition to providing a theological rationale for doing so that resonates within the Judeo-Christian tradition, Heschel also provided an example of personal courage that today's activists could take as a model. Not only was he brave enough to put his frail old body in harm's way in order to participate in civil rights and anti-war demonstrations, but he was also brave enough to do so in the face of grave opposition from his co-religionists and others. Southern Jews warned him that if he came down there and marched for Black civil rights, they would pay the consequences in increased anti-Semitism where they lived; their fears were well-founded, as it turned out, and still he marched.³⁴

Perhaps most admirably, Heschel had the courage to risk making mistakes. He could not be sure that he would not be offensive as a White person speaking on behalf of Black civil rights, and as a Jew offering theological direction to Christians. But he felt that the issues in play were serious enough that he should raise his voice if doing so might further the cause of justice in any way, even if it also made his behavior look questionable. For fear of offending someone or other, it seems, many people silence themselves today. Heschel would inform them that a "state of moral emergency" still exists, and exhort them to act with "high moral grandeur and spiritual audacity."³⁵

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Notes

1 Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin or, Life among the Lowly* (1852; rpt. New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 279.

2 Michael B. Friedland, *Lift Up Your Voice Like a Trumpet: White Clergy and the Civil Rights and Antiwar Movements* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 77-79.

3 Susannah Heschel, "Theological Affinities in the Writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King, Jr.," in *Black Zion: African-American Religious Encounters with Judaism*, Yvonne Chireau and Nathaniel Deutsch, editors (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 170-171.

4 Murray Friedman, *What Went Wrong? The Creation and Collapse of the Black-Jewish Alliance* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 8.

5 Friedman chronicles both the development of this alliance and the political and personal tensions that finally damaged it severely.

6 King's and Heschel's shared religious ideas are detailed in Susannah Heschel, "Theological Affinities," 171 ff., and in Rabbi Marc Schneier, *Shared Dreams: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Jewish Community* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1999), 137 ff.

7 For one contemporary assessment of Heschel's contributions to the civil rights and antiwar movements, along with some comments by his fellow activists, see Friedland, *Lift Up Your Voice*, 234-235.

8 Susannah Heschel, "Theological Affinities," 173-174.

9 Susannah Heschel, "Theological Affinities," 181; for more on Heschel's activism against the Vietnam War, see Mitchell K. Hall, *Because of Their Faith: CALCAV and Religious Opposition to the Vietnam War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990). "CALCAV" was an antiwar organization called Clergy and Laity Concerned About Vietnam, which Heschel co-founded along with Father Daniel Berrigan, S.J., and Lutheran pastor Reverend Richard Neuhaus (Hall, *Because of Their Faith*, 14).

10 Quoted in Or N. Rose, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Man of Spirit, Man of Action* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 59.

11 Schneier, *Shared Dreams*, 136.

12 Michael Ahmann, editor, *Race: Challenge to Religion* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1963), v; this book contains essays based on addresses given at the January 1963 national conference. For more details on the organizers and attendees, see Friedland, *Lift Up Your Voice*, 168-169.

13 Quoted in Morton C. Fierman, *Leap of Action: Ideas in the Theology of Abraham Joshua Heschel* (New York: Lanham, 1990), 31.

14 For details on Heschel's participation in this event, see Schneier, *Shared Dreams*, 145 ff.

15 Quoted in Rose, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 58.

16 Susannah Heschel, "Introduction," in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays by Abraham Joshua Heschel*, Susannah Heschel, editor (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1996), xxiii.

17 Norman H. Finkelstein, *Heeding the Call: Jewish Voices in America's Civil Rights Struggle* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997), 166.

18 Franklin Sherman, *The Promise of Heschel* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), 11.

19 Finkelstein, *Heeding the Call*, 149.

20 Please note: Heschel uses the then-current words "Negro" to refer to a Black person, "man" to refer to all humans, and masculine pronouns to refer to God. Also, for a good one-volume introduction to Judaism, see Hayim Halevy Donin, *To Be a Jew: A Guide to Jewish Observance in Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

21 All citations refer to the paragraph numbers in the VOD text of the speech.

22 Fierman, *Leap of Action*, 32.

23 Susannah Heschel, "Theological Affinities," 173.

24 For more on the King Memorial, go to www.buildthedream.org.

25 Friedman, *What Went Wrong?*, 248, 254.

26 Robert McAfee Brown, "'Some Are Guilty, All Are Responsible': Heschel's Social Ethics," in *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Exploring His Life and Thought*, John C. Merkle, editor (New York: MacMillan, 1985), 137 ff.

27 Schneier, *Shared Dreams*, 156.

28 Quoted in Samuel H. Dresner, *Heschel, Hasidism, and Halakha* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 5.

29 Quoted in Fierman, *Leap of Action*, 83.

30 Quoted in Fierman, *Leap of Action*, 79.

31 Quoted in Fierman, *Leap of Action*, 32.

32 Jacob Neusner, "Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Man," in Abraham Joshua Heschel, *To Grow in Wisdom: An Anthology of Abraham Joshua Heschel*, Jacob Neusner, editor, with Noam M. M. Neusner (Lanham, Maryland: Madison Books, 1990), 3. In addition to the personal reminiscences and information about Heschel's life included in this essay, this anthology also presents a helpful brief summary of Heschel's main contributions to Jewish theology: Jacob Neusner, "The Intellectual Achievement of Abraham Joshua Heschel." Neusner is perhaps an especially good witness on Heschel's theological importance because he makes it clear that he does not agree with his politics; hence the judgment does not smack of partisanship.

33 Cornel West interview on Tavis Smiley National Public Radio broadcast, 14 January 2004; to hear this interview, go to <http://www.npr.org-dmg.php> (audio/x-ms-wax Object).

34 See Jacob Neusner, "Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Man," 10-11.

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