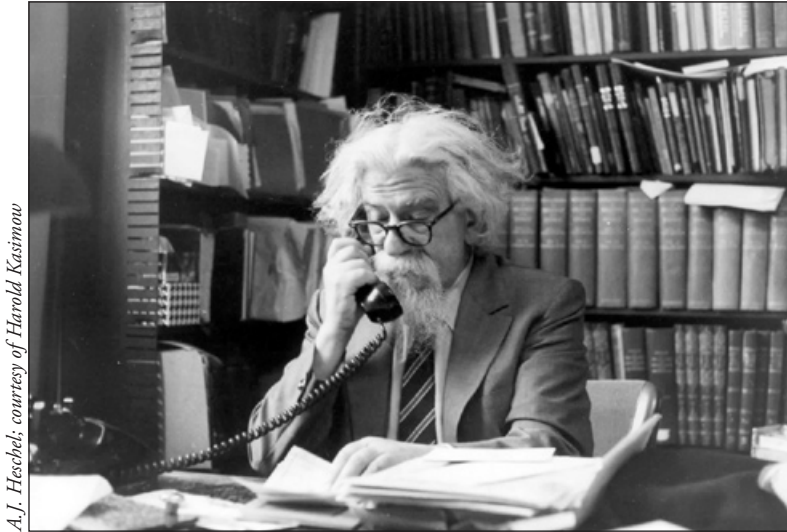


Abraham Joshua Heschel

introducing a messenger of hope

HAROLD KASIMOW AND DAVEEN H. LITWIN



A.J. Heschel: courtesy of Harold Kasimow

INTERRELIGIOUS INSIGHT SPECIAL SECTION

Note from the Editors of Interreligious Insight:

We are delighted to devote this issue's "Creative Encounters" section to the life and thought of Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the true pioneers of interreligious dialogue and engagement. We are grateful to Professor Harold Kasimow and Rabbi Daveen H. Litwin for assembling a fine team of scholars whose reflections on the impact of Heschel make this a notable issue of *Interreligious Insight*.

Harold Kasimow is the George Drake Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at Grinnell College. He studied with Heschel at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York and wrote his Ph.D. thesis on Heschel's thought. He has written a number of articles on Heschel and interreligious dialogue and is co-editor, with Byron Sherwin, of No Religion Is an Island: Abraham Joshua Heschel and Interreligious Dialogue. In fall 2007 he edited a special issue of the journal Shofar titled A Jewish Life: Abraham Joshua Heschel: A Centenary Tribute.

Rabbi Daveen H. Litwin was ordained at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati. She has served as rabbi of congregations and college campuses in the United States and Canada. Currently, she is the Campus Rabbi at the Center for Religion, Spirituality and Social Justice, Grinnell College, Grinnell, Iowa.

Abraham Joshua Heschel is the twentieth-century Jewish theologian most revered by Jews and leaders from other religious traditions.

In a recent issue of *Shofar*, John Keenan, an Episcopal priest and prominent scholar of Buddhism, noted that he

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kept a copy of Heschel's *God in Search of Man* (1955) by his bedside, "so that I might read a portion every morning." The Catholic theologian John Merkle wrote, "In his own life and works, Abraham Joshua Heschel revealed the supreme importance of God as well as what it is like to live with faith in God." No less than Martin Luther King Jr. considered Heschel "a truly great prophet."

What drew so many non-Jewish scholars and clergymen to this profoundly Jewish thinker? The answer, we think, is simple: his message of hope. No other Jewish theologian that we know has shown more love for God's creations or optimism for the potential of humanity.

Heschel's optimism is all the more amazing when we realize that he considered himself to be a "brand plucked from the fire." For some Holocaust survivors, God died in the ashes. But for Heschel, who grew up among the Hasidim of Eastern Europe, God was a reality and

an ever-living presence. Heschel believed that the reality of God gave meaning and significance to life.

Those of us engaged in the search for meaning see Heschel as a model of faith and hope. As a rabbi, scholar, and theologian, he was able to present a core of Judaism in a poetic, profound way that was meaningful and inspiring not only to Jews but to members of other religious faiths.

Heschel's mastery of Jewish tradition gave his teaching substance and credibility. But what led him to be considered a modern day prophet by many Christians was his integrity of living a life that was in consonance with his

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thoughts and beliefs, and his extraordinary contribution and commitment to social justice.

There are those who wonder why Heschel the scholar became one of the most outspoken activists for the social justice issues of his time. Heschel acknowledged that his life of study was transformed to one of action while reading the words of the ancient Israelite prophets. His involvement in social change coincided with the completion of his dissertation on and his revelation that "To be human is to be involved, to act, and to react; to wonder and to respond."

Heschel came to the conclusion: "Since Auschwitz, I have only one rule

of thumb for what I say; would it be acceptable to those people who were burned there?”

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Clearly for Heschel, interfaith dialogue and peace go together and religion cannot be separated from social and political issues. Today, with tensions between Jews, Christians, and Muslims at painful and dangerous levels, dialogue is imperative. Indeed, Heschel urged forward the process of engagement: “History has made us all neighbors. The age of moral mediocrity and complacency has run out. This is a time for radical commitment, for radical action.”

Heschel’s belief in the reality of God and his love of God, his love of humanity as the children of God, and his love of the earth as God’s creation are all reflected in the essays included in this volume of *Interreligious Insight*.

We want to thank the editors of *Interreligious Insight* for devoting this special section to Heschel. Many contemporary religious voices such as those included in this volume see Heschel as a hero of the human spirit. It is heartening to have these young people so deeply committed to interreligious dialogue, reaching out to members of other faiths. Our deepest thanks go to each of the contributors who show us that we can have models across the religious

traditions. This gives us hope that the children of Abraham will one day live in peace.

Heschel’s words still resound today:

*The greatest heresy is despair,
despair of men’s power for good-
ness, men’s power for love....
Daily we should take account
and ask: What have I done today
to alleviate the anguish, to miti-
gate the evil, to prevent humili-
ation?...
Let there be a grain of prophet in
every man!...
Our concern must be expressed
not symbolically, but literally;
not only publicly, but also pri-
vately; not only occasionally, but
regularly. What we need is the
involvement of every one of us
individuals.*