Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's Engagement with Christians and Christian Theology[*]

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How does a Jew speak of Christianity to Christians after the Shoah? We stand "at the limits of available ontologies, available schemes of intelligibility…. How is it that the abject come to make their claim through and against the discourses that have sought their repudiation?" asks the Jewish philosopher Judith Butler.

Remarkably, the Shoah did not alienate my father from Christianity nor leave him abject, bitter, or angry, but instead convinced him that we must come together. Nazism has suffered a defeat, he writes, but the task for all of us is "saving the radiance of the Hebrew Bible," the presence of God, the ongoing effort to break through the callousness of human beings. "our conscience is mute as a wall… The martyrs do not need our recitations of *kaddish* – but we need someone to recite *kaddish* over us, for us, because we have lost our souls," for the opposite of good is not evil, the opposite of good is indifference.

The warm reception of my father's work among Christians, especially Catholics, is an extraordinary development in the history of the West. How did this come about? Joshua Furnal has emphasized, "without Rabbi Heschel it is doubtful that Nostra Aetate would have taken the shape that it did." I marvel at my father's close friendships with individual Christian theologians and the range of people: both Cardinal Bea and the Berrigans; Thomas Merton, Leo Rudloff, and Richard John Neuhaus; Dorothy Day and Monsignor Felix Morlion. Protestants as well, especially his colleagues at Union Theological Seminary, particularly WD Davies, and pastors including Martin Luther King, Jr., William Sloan Coffin, and Albert Cleage. Astonishing is that Reinhold Niebuhr, the most important American theologian of the 20th century, asked my father to deliver the eulogy at his funeral. They recognized that my father had profound respect for Christianity and their friendships were profound.

I hope you realize how astonishing it is that my father, who came from an intensely pious Hasidic family in Warsaw, would appreciate his friendships with Christians. During those years when my father was involved in consultations with Vatican representatives over Nostra Aetate, he was also deeply engaged in the Civil Rights Movement, which was also an ecumenical movement. Imagine what it meant for my father, after living in Germany from 1927 to 1938, to meet Christian theologians with deep respect for Judaism. When my father was in Germany, some Protestant theologians wanted to remove the Old Testament from the Bible because it was a Jewish book; some declared Jesus a German Aryan, not a Jew; some called Hitler a Christ figure and rewrote the Sermon on the Mount to make it military.[1] In America, the Black church regarded the Exodus and the prophets as central to Christianity.

From the moment my father and Dr. King met in January of 1963, they became close friends who often lectured together and who ultimately joined in protesting the war in Vietnam. Despite their radically different backgrounds, their theological affinities are notable. What brought them together? The radiance of the Bible, the prophets, and prayer. Others had a similar sense about my father. Following their first meeting in November 1961, Cardinal Bea sent this note: "A strong, common spiritual bond [exists] between us."

Let us remember that such friendships had been rare in our history. The pastors, priests and nuns who came to our home for Shabbat dinner and for Passover Seder were deeply moved by my father's prayers at the table. As a child, I could see the awe they experienced in witnessing the prayers of a Jew and realizing that they had something to learn about God from Judaism. How do we foster a spiritual relationship? "Show us how you pray," asked the monks at the Benedictine Weston Priory in Vermont when my father visited. Our words of prayer may differ, but our praying is the same. First we praise, then we believe. Yes, we differ in law and creed, but we are united in being objects of God's concern. Our language may be different, "but the embarrassment is the same, and so is the sigh, the fear and trembling, and the conscience. (MGSA 297).

My father spent the war years alone in Cincinnati, teaching at Hebrew Union College, which had obtained the visa that saved his life. He desperately tried to save his mother, three sisters, relatives, and friends who were trapped in Europe, and he was appalled by the indifference to their fate among Jews as well as Christians. As he later recalled, he pleaded, he marched in demonstrations, all to no avail, no one would listen. "I was a stranger in this country. My opinion had no impact. I was called a mystic, not a realist. I recited psalms, fasted, and cried myself out." The books of a theologian are a window into the author's soul, and we come to know my father through his writings. "We all have a terrible loneliness in common," he writes in a 1942 article, "An Analysis of Piety," "The root of religion is the question what to do with the feeling for the mystery of living, what to do with awe, wonder, or fear. Religion, the end of isolation, begins with a consciousness that something is asked of us." Life is not a gift, but a mandate. Life is time and the question he asked himself was, What does God want from me, what does the world need from me at this time? He felt he could not live in isolation, neither as a Hasidic rebbe nor as a scholar removed from the problems of the world.

During those war years, my father wrote several articles on piety and prayer. In one he writes, "prayer starts where expression fails. The words that reach our lips are often but waves of an overflowing stream touching the shore." We live in longing, he writes, hoping to escape the world, even our own thoughts, and find ourselves. Not a soliloquy nor a dialogue, prayer is "an endeavor to become the object of God's thought." (MGSA 345), to be understood, to be known by God. God loves what is left over at the bottom of the heart and cannot be expressed in words. It is the ineffable feeling which reaches God rather than the expressed feeling. God is not alone when we abandon God; we are alone.

My father compares praying and dreaming. Psalm 126:1 begins, "Shir Hama'alot: B'shuv Adonai et shivat Zion hayinu k'cholmim." "When God brought back those who returned to Zion, we were like dreamers." My father writes, "To pray is to dream in league with God, to envision God's holy visions" (Heschel, *Man's Quest*, 19). The ability to pray is a response to loneliness; it is a gift from God and changes our lives. Psalm 66:20 thanks God: "Blessed be God who has not taken away from me the ability to pray nor withheld His grace from me." Even more, the Psalmist writes that in praying, I become prayer: Psalm 109:4, "v'ani tefillah," "I am prayer."

Prayer is not about seclusion or withdrawal from the world. "Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and to ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, falsehoods." (MGSA 262). God is in need of us. Returning from the Civil Rights march in Selma in 1965, he wrote, "For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying." You can see immediately the profound connections my father had with Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Dr. King, and Pope Francis.

My father used to say that Judaism and Christianity need more of Jerusalem, less of Athens, and he mirrored in his own philosophy both the apophatic and cataphatic. Ultimately, he was concerned less with doctrinal formulations than with creating a new spirit, an ability to perceive God's

presence.

The war marks a shift in my father's writings on Christianity. His doctoral dissertation on the prophets, completed in December 1932, is a sharp repudiation of German Protestant biblical scholarship, a topic he abandons after that. His tone changed. In his postwar writings, my father has no interest in the medieval Jewish debates whether the Trinity is idolatry, nor does he try to justify Jewish rejection of Jesus. He was not intimidated by the decrees of Rabbi Norman Lamm, who wrote that Vatican II's "removal of the deicide accusation is a means of lowering Jewish resistance to… conversion to Catholicism," nor by Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, who condemned any Jewish engagement in dialogue with Christians. He also does not join Martin Buber, who proclaimed, "Jesus is my brother," nor did my father participate in the popular modern Jewish effort to claim Jesus for Judaism, and blame Paul for creating Christianity. There is also no tone of apologetics in his work, no effort to appease Luther, Kant, Troeltsch, or other critics of Judaism. When he discusses some of the Christian theological traditions that negate Judaism, he writes that they diminish Christianity. He was with the Catholic theologian Gustave Weigel the night before Weigel's untimely death, and asked him, "Is it really the will of God that there be no more Judaism in the world? Would it really be *ad Majorem Dei gloriam* to have a world without Jews?" And he tells Jews to be grateful for Christianity, for preserving Jewish texts and for creating the field of modern scholarship on the Bible, for bringing the Bible and the God of Abraham to the world, and for Christian theologians who have been a source of inspiration to many Jews.

When my father lectured about interfaith issues, he cited only positive Jewish texts about Christianity. He did not talk about the Shoah and very little about Christian anti-Judaism. He was always interested in parallels and possible historical influences, as when he wrote to Cardinal Bea that no theory of divine dictation of Scripture existed prior to the first half of the second century, and that views of revelation differed considerably among the rabbis. The orthodox Protestant theories of the 16th and 17th centuries regarding the literal truth of Scripture, he wrote, are closely related to the views of Rabbi Akiva.

Of ultimate importance in interfaith relations, my father continuously emphasized, was neither debating points of difference nor searching for parallel teachings, but rather, as he wrote in the conclusion of "No Religion Is an Island," "to cooperate in trying to bring about a resurrection of sensitivity, a revival of conscience; to keep alive the divine sparks in our souls, to nurture openness to the spirit of the Psalms, reverence for the words of the prophets, and faithfulness to the Living God."

He focused on the positive, citing Maimonides, that Christianity and Islam are part of God's design for the redemption of humanity. Christians may interpret Torah differently, but they "believe and profess that the Torah is God's revelation." He cites at length Rabbi Jacob Emden, a distinguished 18th century rabbi in Altona, Denmark, who wrote startlingly positive appreciations of Christianity as well as Islam. Emden writes, "Jesus brought a double goodness to the world. On the one hand he strengthened the Torah of Moses majestically... and not one of our Sages spoke out more emphatically concerning the immutability of the Torah." In Emden's commentary to *Pirke Avot, Etz Avot*, published in 1751, he reaffirms his views. Commenting on *Pirke Avot* 4:11, "every gathering that meets for the sake of Heaven will have an enduring effect" ["*knessiyah leshem shamayim, shesofah lehitkayem*"] (Avot 4:11; 5:17), Emden writes, "a community which is for the sake of heaven includes Christianity and Islam" which have emerged out of Judaism and accepted "the fundamentals of our divine religion … to make known God among the nations … to proclaim that there is a Master in heaven and earth, divine providence, reward and punishment … Who bestows the gift of prophecy … and communicates through the prophets, laws and statutes to live by."

Interfaith begins with faith, he emphasized, and it would be meaningless for Jews to proclaim that Christians affirm God and prophecy if Jews themselves have lost their faith. My father's English books appeared after WWII to an American Jewish audience immersed in Mordecai Kaplan's

Jewish version of the Chicago School of theology. In those days, American Jews wanted to modernize and secularize, and were certain that Orthodoxy was coming to a quick end. Sociologists told us the sacred canopy was shattered, while psychoanalysts warned us that religion was a form of unhealthy masochism.

My father was a distinctly new voice, very different from other modern Jewish thinkers. He was more deeply rooted in all the sources of Judaism; no other Jewish theologian knew the vast range of classical Jewish texts as he did. That also made him strange to Jewish readers who had no idea that the Talmud included theological debates over revelation, or that Kabbalistic *ta'amei hamitzvot*, reasons for the commandments, stemmed from the rabbinic understanding of zoreh gavoha, a divine need. That God needs redemption is integral to the Talmud and liturgy, yet such deviation from an Aristotelian omnipotent God seemed heretical to some Jews. Divine pathos, that God suffers with human beings, was theopaschism, condemned as heretical by the early church, but altogether congenial for Black theologians in the United States whose understanding of the prophets comes closest to my father's thought. Those who are aware of racism understand the prophets' condemnation of disavowal. To those police who claim they are not racist yet murder Black people, enacting the very racism they disavow, Isaiah says, "You felt secure in your wickedness; you said, No one sees me; your wisdom and your knowledge led you astray, and you said in your heart, I am and there is no one beside me" (Isaiah 47:10). To those who exploit and cheat, bringing financial disaster; to those politicians who say they believe in the right to life yet deny the basic needs to sustain life: food, medical care, a home, an education, Jeremiah says, "On your shirt is found the lifeblood of the guiltless poor. Yet in spite of all these things, you say: 'I am innocent.' Behold I will bring you to judgment for saying, 'I have not sinned.'" (Jeremiah 2:14-15).

Callousness, mendacity, indifference. My father said, "We live in a Godless world. If we still had a heart, then it has turned to stone. I often sit and wonder: perhaps our souls went up in flames along with their bodies in Majdanek and in Auschwitz." My father's central hope was that the Catholic Church would come to recognize the holiness in Judaism as a source of blessing for Christians. Yet the holiness of Judaism can only be recognized if the Church abandons proselytism and instead understands Jews as standing in unbroken covenant with God. But that holiness also requires revitalization within Judaism. My father was tremendously critical of American Jewish life – not just secularism but also the superficiality of sermons, the passivity of congregants, the absence of gravitas, the vulgarity of some Bar Mitzvah celebrations. He described the large, new suburban American synagogues as cemeteries where prayer goes to die. Religion declined in the modern world not because of the challenges of science and philosophy, he writes on page one of *God in Search of Man*, but because its message became insipid.

Jews are messengers who have forgotten the message, he writes. How are we to recover? He points out that no religion is an island; during the course of history, when Christians have been pious, their Jewish neighbors have also been pious; we affect each other. "Spiritual betrayal on the part of one of us affects the faith of all of us." We do not live in isolation; "We must choose between interfaith and internihilism."

"The supreme issue [today] is whether we are alive or dead to the challenge and the expectation of the living God. The crisis engulfs all of us. The misery and fear of alienation from God make Jew and Christian cry together." How can we help one another?

My father's emphasis on what we might do together is reaffirmed in the words of Pope Francis. We have a "shared spiritual memory," Pope Francis said in an Address to a Delegation from B'nai B'rith International 30 May 2022. "In the face of violence, in the face of indifference, the pages of Scripture show us the face of our brothers, our sisters. They present us with "the challenge of the other". That is the measure of our fidelity to who we are, to our common humanity: it is measured by our fraternity, by our concern for others." "God asks Cain: "Where is your brother?", even as

he had asked Adam: "Where are you?" (Gen 3:9). Both questions are linked by the same question: *Where*? We cannot be fully ourselves without watching out for our brothers and sisters. We cannot find the Eternal One without welcoming our neighbour." Vatican II made us neighbors.

My father first met Cardinal Bea in Rome on Sunday, November 26, 1961. I am not sure if my father and Cardinal Bea knew that they had both studied at the University of Berlin with the same professor of Semitics, Eugen Mittwoch, Bea in 1913, my father in 1927-33. As you may know, Cardinal Bea, as a theologian concerned with revelation, was also a scholar of the Hebrew Midrashic commentaries on the Song of Songs. My father gave him a special edition of the Midrash in which Rabbi Akiva famously said that the whole world, "olam," is not as important as the moment when the Song of Songs was given to Israel. At their meeting, my father suggested that "olam" might be translated as "time." We have a prophetic responsibility to time, my father said, to recognize what is vital in a particular moment. "Both Judaism and Christianity share the prophets' belief that God chooses agents through whom His will is made known and His work done throughout history."

At their meeting, Cardinal Bea asked my father to prepare a memorandum, which he submitted in May 1962. My father wrote that he hoped the Vatican Council would recognize "the integrity and permanent preciousness" of the Jews as Jews rather than as potential converts and urged the Council to recognize anti-Semitism as a sin that was incompatible with Catholicism. He suggested four points: reject deicide; stop missionary activity; expose Christians to Jewish religious life; and establish a church commission to stop prejudice and nurture Christian-Jewish relations.

Cardinal Bea made an important trip to the United States in March of 1963, just two months after my father delivered his extraordinary lecture on "Religion and Race" at a conference in Chicago, when he first met Martin Luther King, Jr. My father chaired a gathering of rabbis and Jewish leaders at the offices of the American Jewish Committee (AJC) to meet Cardinal Bea. What was discussed? Cardinal Bea wrote, "In reply to questions which had been included in the program, I first of all clarified from the exegetical viewpoint the matter of the Jews' responsibility for the death of Jesus, that of the meaning of the dispersal of the chosen people among the nations, ruling out, as St. Paul does, any idea that God had rejected or gone so far as to curse his own people." That night came a formal dinner in Cardinal Bea's honor at the Plaza Hotel, hosted by the American Jewish Committee.[2] At that dinner, attended by major religious figures of the United States as well as U Thant, Secretary General of the United Nations, my father addressed the Cardinal: "What will save us? God and our ability to stand in awe of each other's faith, of each other's commitment. . . . This is the agony of history: bigotry, the failure to revere each other's faith. We must insist upon loyalty to the unique treasures of our own tradition and at the same time acknowledge that in this eon religious diversity may well be the will of God." I hear the spirit of those words in the words of Pope Paul II when he visited the main synagogue of Rome on April 13, 1986, and spoke of the unique bond between Catholics and Jews: "The Jewish religion is not "extrinsic" to us, but in a certain way "intrinsic" to our own religion."

For my father, the most important question for Jews and Christians meeting one another is, "how should I relate to them spiritually?" After all, my father writes, we may all long for peace, but "peace among men depends upon a relationship of reverence for each other…. Reverence for our freedom. God has a stake in the life of human being, of each one." There can be no compulsion in matters of faith, as Pope John XXIII wrote in the Encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, "Every human being has the right to honor God according to the dictates of an upright conscience." The Ecumenical council should acknowledge the integrity and permanent preciousness of the Jews and Judaism' and accept 'Jews as Jews,' he wrote to Cardinal Bea in early 1964. Can theological traditions change?

As Cardinal Bea wrote, first in his book on divine inspiration, published in 1930, and in many subsequent articles and encyclopedia entries, the revealed word of God is forever, "without

addition and without reduction," yet the church "recognizes a legitimate progress in dogma" not through human agency alone, but with the assistance of the Spirit of truth. God does not revoke his covenant.

In a statement that sounds like a commentary on Romans 11:29, "For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable," my father adds, no religion is final: "No word is God's last word, no word is God's ultimate word." Moreover, Truth is not exclusive – because it cannot be expressed. God speaks in human language, *dibra Torah k'lshon bnai adam*. What is the word of God? Is the language of Scripture God's own language or has God accommodated the limitations of human beings by speaking in words we can understand?

Cardinal Bea writes, "Tradition is found in the living magisterium of the present church, resting on correct foundations," guided by the Holy Spirit from the apostolic age to the present. Precisely this emphasis that the revelation of God is shaped by the human beings entrusted with that revelation, either with the guidance of the magisterium or, in Jewish terms, by rabbinic tradition guided by the Holy Spirit, the Shekhinah, the divine presence: this forms a common core that my father recognized between his own work and that of Cardinal Bea. The widely read 17th century Hebrew text, *Shnei Luhot Haberit*, by Isaiah Horowitz, 1565-1630, comments on a conflict between two statements in the liturgy, "He gave us His Torah of truth," past tense, and "He who gives us the Torah," present tense. (See Deuteronomy 5:22) Horowitz explains: "in truth God already gave the Torah, but He is still giving the Torah and does not stop." My father's great ancestor, the Apter Rav (d 1825), wrote that a Jew must "always see himself, at every moment, as if he is standing at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah…. Every day God gives the Torah to the people Israel… Thus will he achieve a measure of reverence and awe, just as was the case when the Torah was given in fear and in trembling."

My father writes of revelation in his book, *God In Search of Man*: "the prophet is not a passive recipient of revelation, a recording instrument, affected without participation of heart and will…. He is an active partner of the event." What is the consciousness of the prophet? That is the topic of my father's doctoral dissertation.

In that sense, my father was open to change. We cannot all be religious in the same way, he believed; it seems to be the will of God that we express our faith in different ways. Even within Judaism, he supported pluralism. He cites the Kotzker rebbe, who stressed that our Judaism must be authentic to who we are; my father writes that to imitate the faith of our grandparents would be "spiritual plagiarism." Indeed, although I was raised in a home that was faithfully "shomer mitzvot," observant of the commandments, my father suggested that I become a rabbi, and he arranged the Bat Mitzvah that I wanted. Times are changing, he told me, especially for women. The prophet, he wrote, "is an iconoclast, challenging the apparently holy, revered, and awesome. Beliefs cherished as certainties, institutions endowed with supreme sanctity, [the prophet] exposes as scandalous pretensions." (Prophets 12)

Conclusion:

There is a debate in the Talmud between two rabbis, Rav and Shmuel, as to whether the world was created for the sake of Moses, so that he might receive the Torah, or for the sake of David, so that he might sing hymns and psalms in praise of God.

The answer, of course, is that the world was created for the sake of both Scripture and psalms. We might ask a similar question about the goals of theological scholarship and even the purpose of a lecture: do we become scholars in order to receive and transmit Scripture, that is, our research findings, or do we become scholars in order sing psalms, that is, to inspire ourselves and others to become attuned to the wonder that is the beginning of faith?

Moses says in Deuteronomy 32:1: "Give ear, O heavens, and let me speak; let the earth listen to the words of my mouth." *Haazinu hashamayim v'adabeira; v'tishma ha'aretz imrei fi*. The rabbis explain that at that moment, Moses stood in heaven and spoke to both heaven and earth. Let us remember that dialogue is not carried out just between us; God is present and listening. May our dialogue be filled with psalms and become a prayer.

1 Susannah Heschel, The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany (Princeton, 2028).
2 Among those attending were rabbis representing the three main sectors of American Judaism: Rabbi Louis Finklestein (Conservative), Rabbi Joseph Lookstein (Orthodox), Rabbi Albert Minda (Reform), and Rabbi Julius Mark (Reform).

1 Published in German: Susannah Heschel, Das Engagement von Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel für Christ:innen und für die christliche Theologie. In: Abraham Joshua Heschel – Prophetie und Dialog. Hg.v. René W. Dausner: Heft 2+3/2023 der Zeitschrift für christlich-jüdische Begegnung im Kontext, S. 168-178 (https://zfbeg.org/ojs/index.php/cjbk/issue/view/107).

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