

Three Meetings With Abraham Heschel

When I first met Professor Abraham Joshua Heschel, he had just arrived from abroad, at the invitation of President Julian Morgenstern, to join the faculty of Hebrew Union College. World War II had begun, but the United States in 1940 was still neutral. Every effort was being made by responsible Jewish institutions of learning, as well as many other public institutions, to bring to America the few Jewish scholars who were in Germany or had sought temporary refuge elsewhere. Professor Heschel at that time spoke English somewhat haltingly, as I recall, and so our conversation when he visited me in New York on his way to Cincinnati was largely in Hebrew.

He was, of course, extremely grateful to the institution which had enabled him to come to America, and to President Morgenstern in particular. In the course of conversation with Professor Heschel, we discovered many friends in common, although he derived from one of the most famous Hasidic families in Europe, and I could trace my ancestry no further back than my greatgrandfathers. It was an inspiration to see in my own home a lineal descendant of the famous Maggid of Mezeritch eight generations back and (on his mother's side) from the equally famous "Compassionate One," Rabbi Levi Yitzhak. He was related by blood-kinship or marriage to almost every important Hasidic "dynasty" in Europe.

He was acquainted with a scholar

whom both of us greatly revered, the famous Talmudist, the late Dr. Chayyim Heller. Dr. Heller had for a time headed an academy in Berlin, intended to develop modern scientific scholars in rabbinics and related fields, and was trying to attract especially those who had studied in Eastern European *yeshivot* and required introduction to Western critical thought and critical scholarship. Professor Heschel had studied with him, but mainly at the University of Berlin (from which he had received his doctorate). Professor Heschel, although still in his early thirties, had profound knowledge of both kabbalistic literature and general philosophy—a combination as rare then as it is now.

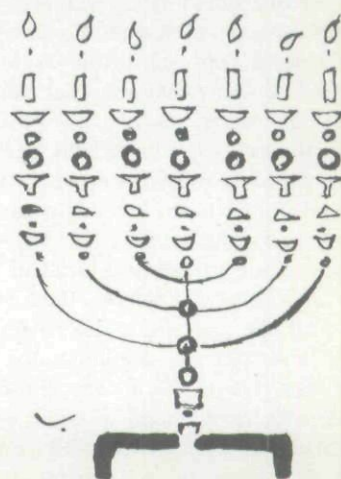
Of my subsequent meetings and discussions with him, two remain particularly vivid, although I could mention many others. In 1944, when he accepted a dinner invitation to my home, our seminary was expecting to invite him to join our faculty. Professor Louis Ginzberg, who was fascinated by him, as well as Professor Saul Lieberman and Professor Mordecai M. Kaplan (who differ from each other so greatly in their outlook on Judaism), all joined in recommending him unstintingly. Professor Harry A. Wolfson of Harvard, the master in the field of Jewish as well as general philosophy, whom I had consulted, recommended three people, but Professor Heschel was preeminent. With such wide agreement regarding the potentialities of the

young scholar, neither our faculty nor our board of directors had any hesitation in asking Professor Heschel to come to the seminary.

At dinner, during our preliminary conversation on the subject, he spoke, to my astonishment, in faultless, fluent, poetic English. I boldly asked how he had mastered the new language so thoroughly in so short a time. He told me: "I can tell the date when I learned each English word I now use." What a fantastic achievement!

Soon afterward, Professor Heschel became a member of the seminary family, exerting a profound influence on students and alumni alike, and gradually developing into the great leader, eloquent orator and prolific writer universally recognized as the years passed by.

One day in the 1960's, he asked to



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talk over a very important matter with me. He had been invited to visit Pope Paul VI, to discuss some problems of Catholic-Jewish relations, particularly as they might bear on the Second Vatican Council. Professor Heschel wanted my advice about whether to accept the invitation and, if he did, what he was to urge, and how strongly to urge it.

I had no hesitation in advising him certainly to accept the invitation, which opened such vistas for good in the world, not only for the betterment of relations between Roman Catholics and Jews, but for the influence of both religious groups on the affairs of men.

He told me that that was how he, too, felt; but he was glad to know that I agreed with him.

As to what specifically to seek, and how strongly to urge it, I was at first hesitant to offer any suggestion. Each person, it has always seemed to me, does best what comes most naturally to him. In communications with the great and the powerful, which are generally brief, it has always been my belief that all one could really achieve was to implant some understanding of one's own general approach to the world.

Detailed conversations that might affect the decisions of the Vatican Council would have to be held by Professor Heschel with others who could give him more time. But this occasion might, I thought, be different. He was, indeed, going to meet the head of the Roman Catholic Church. But, after all, the Pope was also a fellow-clergyman, and not an administrator or politician. There was a community of concern between them, to begin with. Doubtless, the Pope was as concerned with the increasing secularization of

our age as was Professor Heschel. Doubtless, too, he suffered pain at the injustices he saw prevailing in many places, as did Professor Heschel. As the Pope looked back over the history of the past two thousand years, and especially of the past thirty years, he, like all of us, must have been horrified that a group of gangsters led by a mad genius seized control of one of the most culturally advanced nations in the world, hoodwinked its people and then others into a sense of security, and finally launched a world war which, but for some basic Providential errors of judgment on his part, might have made him master of Europe. Doubtless, in retrospect, the Pope, like everyone in this generation, was wondering how he could live at peace with himself after the frightful events in Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen and where not. And doubtless, the Pope, like teachers of religion everywhere, was asking himself, as all of us in this generation must ask ourselves, where we had failed in our task.

Therefore, the moment had come for Professor Heschel candidly to describe to the Pope how Jews felt about the past. Of course, we all knew that anti-Semitism was pagan in origin. But we also knew that not every Christian was aware of the pagan origins of anti-Semitism, and that at least some were deluded into thinking that it is an article of Christian faith, invented by the Apostles (forgetting that they, too, were Jews).

There also was the problem of proselytization. The Jewish people had lost one-third of its small number, a third that included many whom Professor Heschel had known, loved and revered; a third that had been re-

sponsible for much of Jewish learning and scholarship in our time, as well as for Jewish piety and devotion. It would be difficult, indeed, to rebuild the Temple of Eastern and Central European Judaism which had been so ruthlessly destroyed. But for our effort to have some measure of success, two things were indispensable: protection and understanding for the men and women whose tireless labors and amazing genius were being concentrated on the state of Israel; and cessation of the effort to lure Jews away from their natural spiritual habitat in Judaism. Jews had already been reduced from 18 million to 11 million. They could not afford the loss of even one more soul.

How strongly to urge the request? It seemed to me that in the danger in which the Jewish people stood, and because of that danger, the peril to so much that (in our opinion) depended on the survival and advancement of its faith, no words, gestures or expressions sincerely felt could be extravagant. Obviously, there was no place for anger or vehemence or recrimination or blame, for Professor Heschel would be talking to a friend, who had generously invited him for friendly discussion of a common problem in the spiritual world.

When Professor Heschel returned from Rome, he thoughtfully spent several hours with me, describing in detail what had occurred, and how much he thought he had achieved. But he had achieved more at that time than one could know, for when, some years later, he was in Italy again on a lecture tour, he was once more invited for an audience by Pope Paul—this time as a well-known friend with whom the Pope could discuss some of his problems in great confidence.

The Jewish people, and indeed the whole world, are poorer because of Professor Heschel's death. But one must think of his life with gratitude, for he was a unique product of a tumultuous and changing time; he had been Providentially given it, to serve it while he could.

[RABBI LOUIS FINKELSTEIN, Chancellor Emeritus of the Jewish Theological Seminary, continues as a professor of theology in that institution, a post he has held since 1931.] ■

