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Abraham Heschel and the Catholic Heart

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On the centenary of the birth of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel considering the appeal of his life and work to Christians illumines further the richness of his witness.

The “Catholic heart” to which Rabbi Heschel appeals so fulsomely does not beat solely, exclusively (or even uniformly) within the precincts of the Catholic Church. I have reference here, in part but not limited to, Paul Tillich’s idea of “Catholic substance,” which operates wherever it operates in the church: to the sacramental understanding and living of the Christian life, to the experience of God’s immanent presence, to the essential place of religious symbolism and of priesthood for Christians and to the importance given the mystical, or contemplative, dimension of Christian life.¹ There is here no attempt to horde the Catholic spirit.

Wherever what one Jewish thinker has called “this Christ-centered form of Judaism”² called Christianity emulates its Jewish mother,³ (at her most faithful), wherever this occurs, Christianity is deeply incarnational.⁴ It rejects dualism,

¹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vol. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 245; and a full treatment of the “Spiritual Presence,” which is made concrete by Catholic substance, Chapter 2, “The Spiritual Presence,” 111-161.

² I first heard the expression by Reuven Kimelman of Brandeis University in the DVD *Walking God’s Paths: Christians and Jews in Candid Conversation* (Boston College Center for Christian-Jewish Learning on behalf of the National Council of Synagogues and the Bishops’ Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004). Also available at http://www.bc.edu/research/cj/meta-elements/texts/cirelations/resources/education/Walking_Gods_Paths.htm.

³ Rabbi Heschel writes: “Judaism is the mother of the Christian faith. It has a stake in the destiny of Christianity. Should a mother ignore her child...? Is it not our duty to help one another in trying to overcome hardness of heart?” in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 242.

⁴ See an excellent essay dealing with a principle feature of shared Jewish and Christian incarnationalism in Elliot R. Wolfson, “Judaism and

celebrates Divine-human embrace and experiences grace (God’s self-communication) all around us. Synonymously, incarnational religious imagination is sacramental. In the words of Richard McBrien, “...the sacramental perspective is one that ‘sees’ the divine in the human, the infinite in the finite, the spiritual in the material, the transcendent in the immanent, the eternal in the historical...all reality is sacred.”⁵ This is what animates the Catholic heart. (So, clearly I am employing the term “incarnational” more expansively than to designate the doctrine of Jesus Christ, human and divine, and least of all the exclusivist and docetic expression of that doctrine.)

And Rabbi Heschel nurtures this Catholic heart because he is so powerfully and uniformly incarnational. And a singular expression of this spirit is the seamless link which he forges between contemplative practice and prophetic action. (And, too, between ecstatic and liturgical prayer and just action, not, however, subjects of this essay.)

The link between contemplative practice and prophetic action is one which Judaism’s Catholic children have sought to sustain. It is the link, (but also the tension or paradox), of which Heschel wrote in *A Passion For Truth*, between Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer, the Baal Shem Tov, and Rabbi Menachem Mendel, the Kotzker Rebbe. It is the link, and also the tension and the paradox, as Heschel wrote, between the Song of Songs and the Book of Ecclesiastes, between ecstasy and poetry on the one hand, and contrition and judgment on the other.⁶

Incarnation,” in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, ed. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, David Novak et al. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000).

⁵ Richard P. Mc Brien, *Catholicism*. Revised and updated edition (North Blackburn, Victoria: Collins Dove, 1994), 9.

⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *A Passion for Truth* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 3-83.

(It is also broadly analogous to Tillich's "Catholic substance" and "Protestant principle," this despite Heschel's firm and whimsical rejection of Tillich's idea of the "Ground of being").⁷

Linking the practice of contemplation and prophetic action, prayer and works of compassion, justice and peace, is work Heschel shared with Thomas Merton, who also sought to forge such a link. Edward Kaplan called Merton "...the most comparable [contemporary] American figure..." to Heschel, "...in intellectual acumen, worldliness, emotional intensity, ethical militancy and piety."⁸ Heschel and Merton knew and revered one another. And I will employ them together in further elaborating the thesis of this essay. But before that, a final preliminary word about "heart."

"Heart" is the indispensable metaphor bequeathed to Western religious consciousness and imagination by Judaism, especially in the Psalms. It means "inner self," which is to say the "whole self." In Merton's words, "The inner self is not a part of our being like a motor in a car. It is our entire substantial reality itself, on its highest and most personal and most existential level. It is like life, and it is life."⁹

⁷ Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p. 408: "There are a great many people who read the word of God and don't believe in Him. Let me give you an example. One of the most popular definitions common in America today was developed by a great Protestant theologian: God is the ground of being. So everybody is ready to accept it. Why not? Ground of being causes me no harm. Let there be a ground of being, doesn't cause me any harm, and I'm ready to accept it. It's meaningless."

⁸ Edward K. Kaplan, *Holiness in Words: Abraham Joshua Heschel's Poetics of Piety* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 71.

⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 6.

And, again: "Heart refers to the deepest psychological ground of one's personality, the inner sanctuary where self analysis goes beyond analytic reflection and opens out into metaphysical and theological confrontation with the Abyss of the unknown yet present one who is 'more intimate to us than we are to ourselves.'"¹⁰

In the same key, it is said the Baal Shem Tov, the "Master of the Good Name," brings healing by whispering the name. The name is the "Jewish heart." It is sufficient! Nothing is omitted to say the "Jewish heart."

A good Jew is formed within the people, Israel. And Christians who participate in the Catholic spirit do not know themselves except within the community which is the church. This points to the necessary liturgical formation of Jews and Christians. Nevertheless, for Heschel, as for Merton, the seamless link between contemplative practice and prophetic action demands that in a spiritually maturing lifetime our lives are lived progressively from the inside out! What is inside reveals itself in social relations. There is no more political word than "prayer," no more effective political program than cultivating "purity of heart."

However, the link is obscured, possibly repudiated, when cultivating the inner self in contemplative prayer is misidentified and seen as a manifestation of what Leo Baeck, famously and with justification, rejected as "romantic religion:"

Feeling is supposed to mean everything: this is the quintessence of romanticism...Its danger however which it

¹⁰ Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Image Book Doubleday, 1996), 33. The quote within a quote at the end is Merton acknowledging Saint Augustine's evocation of God as "*interior intimo meo*," "more near to me than I am to myself," in *Confessions*.

cannot escape is this: the all important feeling culminates eventually in vacuity or in substitutes or it freezes and becomes rigid. And before this happens, it follows a course which takes it either into sentimentality or into the fantastic; it dodges reality particularly that of the Commandments, and it takes refuge in passivity when confronted with the ethical task of the day. Empathy makes up for much and gives a freedom which really is a freedom from decision and independence from inner obligation.¹¹

It seems to me one of the generative themes of Rabbi Heschel's life and work was to distinguish the seamlessness of the life of prayer and of prophecy from this ethically pallid religiosity.

An adequate, if not exhaustive, litany of the fruits of contemplative prayer is to become present to God within, to sanctify our time, to deepen our gratitude for ordinary things and to cultivate a silent self. Heschel and Merton invariably frame their thoughts on these contemplative strengths in ways that bring out their ethical implications. (Again, both tie ethical living to liturgical formation as well; and Heschel does not use the language of contemplation so much as Merton. Still there can, I think, be little question that what appears below points to contemplative practice.)

Of God's presence within, Heschel writes:

We do not step out of the world when we pray; we merely see the world in a different setting. The self is not the hub, but the spoke of the revolving wheel. In prayer we shift the center of living from self-consciousness to self-surrender.

¹¹ Leo Baeck, *The Essence of Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 86.

God is the center toward which all forces tend. He is the source and we are the flowing of His force. The ebb and flow of His tides. Prayer takes the mind out of narrow self-interest, and enables us to see the world in the mirror of the holy. For when we betake ourselves to the extreme opposite of the ego, we can behold a situation from the aspect of God.¹²

And Merton:

At the center of our being is a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes our lives...This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us.¹³

Of the sanctification of time, Heschel writes:

The passage of hours is either an invitation to despair or a ladder to eternity... There are hours which perish or hours which join the everlasting. Prayer is a crucible in which time is cast in the likeness of the eternal. Humans hand over our time to God in the secrecy of single words. When anointed by prayer, a person's thoughts and deeds do not sink into nothingness, but merge into the endless knowledge of an all embracing God. We yield our thoughts to God who endowed us with a chain of days for the duration of our lives.¹⁴

¹² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *I Asked For Wonder: A Spiritual Anthology*, ed. Samuel H. Dresner (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 1983), 20.

¹³ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 112, quoted in Lawrence Cunningham, *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Ideal* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmann Publishing Company, 1999), 61.

¹⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1951), 36.

And Merton, first on a prosaic experience of time:

...when everyone is obsessed with lack of time, lack of space, with saving time, conquering space, projecting into time and space the anguish produced within them by the technological furies of size, volume, quantity, speed, number, price, power and acceleration...

An experience healed by contemplative time, “temps vierge,” “virgin time:”

...not as stopgap...not a blank to be filled or an untouched space to be conquered and violated, but a space that can enjoy its own potentialities and hopes – and its own presence to itself...open to others – compassionate time rooted in a sense of common illusion and in criticism of it.¹⁵

Of gratitude for ordinary things, Heschel writes:

The ineffable inhabits the magnificent and the common, the grandiose and the tiny facts of reality alike. Some people sense this quality at distant intervals in extraordinary events; others sense it in the ordinary events, in every fold, in every nook; day after day, hour after hour. To them things are bereft of triteness. Slight and simple as things may be, a morsel of bread, a word, a sigh, they hide a never ending secret: A glimpse of God? Kinship with the spirit of Being? An eternal flash of the will?¹⁶

¹⁵ Thomas Merton, “Rain and the Rhinoceros,” in *Raids on the Unspeakable and The Other Side of the Mountain*, cited in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, ed. William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F.O’Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2002), 486ff.

¹⁶ Heschel, *Wonder*, 28.

And Merton:

If you penetrate by detachment and purity of heart to the inner, secret ground of your ordinary experience, you will attain to a liberation that nobody can touch.¹⁷

Of silence, Rabbi Heschel writes:

Is not listening to the pulse of wonder worth silence and abstinence from self-assertion? Why do we not set aside an hour for devotion to God by surrendering to stillness. We dwell on the edge of mystery and ignore it, wasting our souls and risking our stake in God.¹⁸

And, in *The Sabbath*, that to “...enter the holiness of the day [we] must first lay down the profanity of clattering commerce.”¹⁹

And in this same vein, associating silence with “inner solitude” as he did so often, Merton writes:

No man who seeks liberation and light in solitude, no man who seeks spiritual freedom can afford to yield passively to all the appeals of a society of salesmen, advertisers and consumers... Keep your eyes clear and your ears quiet and your mind serene. Breathe God’s air. Work, if you can, under His sky... But if you have to live in a city and work among machines and ride in the subways and eat in a place where the radio makes you deaf with spurious news and where the food destroys your life and the sentiments of those around you poison your heart with boredom, do

¹⁷ Merton, *Inner Experience*, 69.

¹⁸ Heschel, *Wonder*, 21.

¹⁹ Heschel, *Sabbath*, 13.

not be impatient. But accept it as the love of God and as a seed of solitude planted in your soul. If you are appalled by those things, you will keep your appetite for the healing silence of recollection. But meanwhile, keep your sense of compassion for the men who have forgotten the very concept of solitude.²⁰

For Heschel, as for Merton, cultivating presence to God within, sanctifying time, being grateful for ordinary things and practicing to silence one's heart, all animate and nurture prophecy, works of compassion, justice and peace. The God encountered within offers no palliative rendering passion for justice optional. Time is made sacred for service, what Rabbi Heschel calls "the unearned right to serve."²¹ Gratitude for ordinary things attunes the contemplative Jew and Christian to how many are deprived of ordinary things. In silence we are schooled to listen to the silent voice of a God who wants justice, mercy and humility.

Addressing the separation of religion and politics, of church and state, Abraham Heschel said:

...prayer as a voice of mercy, as a cry for justice, as a plea for gentleness, must not be kept apart. Let the spirit of prayer dominate the world. Let the spirit of prayer interfere

in the affairs of men. Prayer is private, a service of the heart, but let concern and compassion born out of prayer dominate public life...Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and ruin pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, falsehood.²²

And near the end of a monastic lifetime, Thomas Merton wrote of the desert into which this life had led him:

What is my new desert? The name of it is compassion. There is no wilderness so terrible, so beautiful, so arid and so fruitful as the wilderness of compassion. It is the only desert that will flourish like the lily. It shall become a pool. It shall bud forth and blossom and rejoice with joy. It is in the desert of compassion that the thirsty land turns into springs of water, that the poor possess all things.²³

Susannah Heschel aptly compares her father to the Baal Shem Tov: "Like the Baal Shem Tov, he brought heaven to earth and in his writings we have a revelation of the holiness of Jewish life."²⁴

And, too, the holiness of Christian life. Thanks to Rabbi Heschel from a Catholic heart.

²⁰ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1962), 84 and 87.

²¹ Heschel, *Wonder*, 22.

²² Abraham Joshua Heschel, "On Prayer," *Conservative Judaism* 25, no.1 (Fall 1970): 7f.

²³ Thomas Merton, *The Intimate Merton: His Life From His Journals*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo and Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 86.

²⁴ Heschel, *Moral Grandeur*, 32.