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Abraham Heschel's prophetic Judaism

John Dear S.J. | Jun. 14, 2011 On the Road to Peace

?Daily we should take account and ask: What have I done today to alleviate the anguish, to mitigate the evil, to prevent humiliation??

So advised Rabbi Abraham Heschel, one of the wisest religious leaders of our time. His writings shine with luminous truth and love. They hold a rare authenticity because he lived his own teachings with an astonishing integrity.

A new collection, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Essential Writings*, has brought together some of that wisdom.

This beautiful collection is edited by his daughter, Susannah Heschel, professor of Jewish Studies at Dartmouth College -- one of our best scholars of religious studies. I?ve been studying her books for years, especially *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* and *Betrayal: German Churches and the Holocaust* (edited with Robert Ericksen)

Susannah Heschel has written a superb introduction about her father and his work to begin this anthology. Born in Warsaw in 1907 to a long line of Hasidic rabbis, Abraham Heschel traveled to Germany to study philosophy. Expelled back to Warsaw, he escaped from Poland just weeks before the Nazi invasion. He lost his family and friends during the Holocaust. He settled first in Cincinnati, then in New York, and quickly began to turn out ground-breaking books that marked a true spiritual renewal within Judaism.

As he reopened the best spiritual and prophetic traditions within Judaism, Heschel reached out -- against all common wisdom -- to a wide array of Christians, including Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, and Daniel and Philip Berrigan. A passionate champion of interfaith dialogue, he served as an official observer at Vatican II and was influential in challenging the Catholic Church to overcome its legacy of anti-Semitism. He marched for Civil Rights next to Dr. King and regularly joined protests against the Vietnam War. Everywhere he went, he stressed the ?holy dimension of all existence.?

?I am still amazed by my father?s courage, after losing his family in the war, to fall in love, marry and have a child,? Susannah writes. ?I must add: he was never depressed, never moody or withdrawn or melancholy. Our family home was filled with laughter, jokes and playfulness?. Despair is forbidden, he used to say. God is everywhere and never gives us a task without also giving us the strength to carry it out.?

These personal descriptions bring the great man and his mighty word to new life.

In this collection, we get a taste of Rabbi Heschel?s deep insights on themes such as prayer, the Sabbath, faith, wonder, celebration, interfaith work, and God. In his books *Man Is Not Alone* and *God In Search of Man*, Heschel urged us to cultivate our inner lives so that we grow in awareness of God?s searching for us. In his writings about God, Heschel stressed the fundamental experience of awe, wonder and radical amazement as keys to an authentic spirituality and prayer.

?Awareness of the divine begins with wonder,? Heschel wrote.

> "Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion -- its message becomes meaningless. Religion is an answer to humanity?s ultimate questions. [We need] to rediscover the questions to which religion is an answer."

Heschel?s critique of institutionalized Judaism rings true for all organized religion, especially Catholicism. We have lost our awe of God, our wonder at creation, our radical amazement at life, he said.

Heschel recommends we stand in wonder before God?s creation, which only hints at God?s own grandeur. Then, cultivate ?a sense of ultimate embarrassment,? he suggests. Our lack of embarrassment before God and God?s creation is at the heart of our indifference and cruelty. Embarrassment before the wonder of God and God?s creation will lead us back to ?gratitude, true appreciation, and awe.? This experience of God will then lead to prophecy.

Learning about the great rabbi?s life, integrity, and intelligence helps me understand his interest in the biblical prophets. Over time, he became perhaps the world?s greatest expert on the prophets, and in the end, he became one of the world?s great prophets.

In his mammoth study, *Prophets*, Heschel sets out not to write a history of the prophets, but ?to develop a phenomenological method for understanding the nature of the prophetic experience. What was it to experience being a prophet? How did the prophets experience God?s call and message? What is the purpose of prophecy??

Such questions, rarely asked today, grew from his own experience of God and response to the world?s injustice. His insights need to be reconsidered by Jews and Christians alike. Here is a sampling:

> Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor. God is raging in the prophet?s words. In speaking, the prophet reveals God. This is the marvel of a prophet?s work: in his words, the invisible God becomes audible. Divine power bursts in his words. The authority of the prophet is in the Presence his words reveal.
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> To a person endowed with prophetic sight, everyone else appears blind; to a person whose ear perceives God?s voice, everyone else appears deaf. The prophet hates the approximate; he shuns the middle of the road. Carried away by the challenge, the demand to straighten out humanity?s ways, the prophet is strange, one-sided, an unbearable extremist.
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> Others may suffer from the terror of cosmic aloneness; the prophet is overwhelmed by the grandeur of divine presence. The prophet disdains those for whom God?s presence is comfort and security; to him it is a challenge, an incessant demand. God is compassion, not compromise; justice, though not inclemency.
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> The prophet?s word is a scream in the night. While the world is at ease and asleep, the prophet feels the blast from heaven. The prophet faces a coalition of callousness and established authority and undertakes to stop a mighty stream with mere words. The purpose of prophecy is to conquer callousness, to change the inner person as well as to revolutionize history. The prophets remind us of the moral state of a people:

> Few are guilty, but all are responsible.
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> It is embarrassing to be a prophet. There are so many pretenders, predicting peace and prosperity, offering cheerful words, adding strength to self-reliance, while the prophet predicts disaster, pestilence, agony, and destruction. People need exhortations to courage, endurance, confidence, fighting spirit, but Jeremiah proclaims: You are about to die if you do not have a change of heart and cease being callous to the word of God.
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> The prophet is a person who suffers the harm done to others. Wherever a crime is committed, it is as if the prophet were the victim and the prey. All prophecy is one great exclamation: God is not indifferent to evil!

?Let there be a grain of prophet in everyone!? Heschel concluded.

Heschel lived both the mystical and prophetic life. Ten days before he was killed, Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke with him at a rabbinical conference and called Heschel ?a truly great prophet.?

?Here and there we find those who refuse to remain silent behind the safe security of stained-glass windows, and they are forever seeking to make the great ethical insights of our Judeo-Christian heritage relevant in this day and in this age,? King said. ?I feel that Rabbi Heschel is one of the persons who is relevant at all times, always standing with prophetic insights to guide us through these difficult days.?

Susannah Heschel gives a great example of how her father tried to wake people up. Once he asked his rabbinical students at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, ?Is gelatin kosher??

They immediately began to debate this question among themselves.

But then he asked, ?Are nuclear weapons kosher?? They were stunned into silence. They didn?t know what to say. With such questions, Heschel exposes our predicament, and the need to return to the truth of wisdom and prophecy.

?To speak about God and to remain silent on the Vietnam War is blasphemous,? he announced. Throughout those years, Heschel denounced the war and joined many demonstrations against it. He helped form Clergy and Laity Concerned About the War. Over time, he wrote:

> The most basic way [people are] divided is between those who believe that war is unnecessary and those who believe war is inevitable; between those who believe that the sword is the symbol of honor and those to whom seeking to convert swords into plowshares is the only way to keep our civilization from disaster. Most of us prefer to disregard the dreadful deeds we do over there [in Vietnam]. The atrocities committed in our name are too horrible to be credible. It is beyond our power to react vividly to the ongoing nightmare, day after day, night after night. So we bear graciously other people?s suffering. [But] indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself.

Throughout those years, he closely followed and supported his friends Daniel and Philip Berrigan. In 1972, in failing health and against doctor?s orders, Heschel rode the bus with Dan from Manhattan to Danbury, Connecticut, to welcome Phil out of prison. Back in New York City the next morning, as Dan and Phil were preparing to go to the Heschel?s house for lunch, they received a call that he had just died. His pursuit of peace with justice preoccupied him to the very end.

Perhaps he was so sensitive to the suffering of others because he had suffered so much during the Holocaust. Perhaps he was so steadfast in his pursuit of God because he came from a long line of holy rabbis. However he did it, Heschel led everyone back to the truth and presence of God.

?He pointed out that human suffering was understood in rabbinic thought as a moment to identify with God?s suffering and also a challenge to overcome evils, one by one, through justice,? Susannah Heschel writes.

?The Holocaust, for him, was not an issue of theodicy, but of anthropodicy: how could God keep faith in us after the atrocities we have committed??

For Heschel, God is not hidden; God is hiding.

?God?s hiding is a function, not an essence; an act, not a permanent state. God is waiting to be disclosed, to be admitted into our lives. Our task is to open our souls to God, to let God again enter our deeds.?

I?m grateful to Orbis Books for its ?Modern Spiritual Masters Series,? and to Susannah Heschel for this wonderful collection of her father?s work. Abraham Heschel challenges me to break through despair and institutionalized religion to rediscover the wonder and awe of God and then to go forth and speak out in God?s name against injustice.

I wish all American and Israeli Jews would hear again Heschel?s prophetic message and end the occupation of the Palestinians, but I also wish all Christians and Catholics would heed this wise teacher and renew their own mystical and prophetic depths.

With Heschel?s guidance, we might not only end our wars and injustices, we might reclaim our mystical and prophetic roots, and once again be blessed.

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[**Editor's Note**: John Dear's column is on a summer schedule and will be posted every other week through early August.]

Next year, John Dear will undertake a national book tour for his forthcoming book, *Lazarus Come Forth!*, which portrays Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. To host John in your church or school for an evening talk and book-signing, send an email through www.johndear.org. Next week, John will speak at the Wildgoose Festival in Durham, NC (www.wildgoosefestival.org). July 1-2, he will offer a workshop in Chicago on Jesus? teachings on peace, hope and love at Loyola Univ. From August 8-15, he will offer a weeklong retreat on Jesus? teachings on peace, hope and love at the spectacular Ghost Ranch Center in New Mexico (www.ghostranch.org). John?s latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), and other recent books, are available from www.amazon.com. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services? ?Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund,? go to: http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn. For further information, or to schedule a lecture or retreat, visit: www.johndear.org.

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