

Halina Wind Preston ¹

An Appreciation of Dr. Heschel

[about 13½ minutes] ²

Abraham Joshua Heschel ³ Shloshim ⁴ Memorial Service ⁵

Sponsored by the Rabbinical Association of Delaware

8 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 21, 1973

Temple Beth Emeth, Wilmington, Delaware

Another Polish Jew is gone.

It is true that Professor Heschel was also my teacher, and one of the foremost Jewish scholars of our time, but his loss is irreparable when viewed as the symbol of the end of an era – in his own words, “the golden period in Jewish history, in the history of the Jewish soul.” ⁶ The heavenly gates that had been closing in on Polish Jewry had been left slightly open just long enough to receive the souls of its *sh’erit hapleita*, the last surviving children. Abraham Joshua Heschel has now crossed that threshold.

In a sense, he met me before I had the privilege of meeting him. Upon liberation on July 27, 1944, I immediately began sending what was to become a long series of letters to 3080 Broadway in New York. That is the address of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, where my brother had been a student before the war, and which, to my knowledge at the

¹ Halina Wind Preston (1922-82), daughter of a poor Belzer Hasidic watchmaker in the Carpathian Mountains of Polish Galicia, survived 14 months hiding in the sewers of Nazi-occupied Lviv in 1943-44, and became a Jewish educator and Delaware’s acknowledged spokeswoman for the victims and survivors of the Holocaust. She studied under Professor Heschel at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York, which sent her on a speaking tour beginning in 1949 that made her the first Holocaust survivor to speak about her experiences throughout the United States.

² Transcription of cassette tape recording of Halina Wind Preston remarks at the service combined with 6-page printout of her remarks taken from her 11-page handwritten notes. Her remarks are as much a eulogy for Polish Jewry as for Heschel himself.

³ Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Ph.D. (1907-72), born in Warsaw and educated in Poland and Germany, was Professor of Ethics and Mysticism at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, in New York. A civil rights activist, he famously marched arm-in-arm with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. from Selma to Montgomery in 1965.

⁴ *Shloshim* (Hebrew for 30) is a 30-day period of mourning that ends with a ceremony or service marking the end of formal mourning.

⁵ Transcribed by David Lee Preston from MP3 digitized by George Blood from original 60-minute cassette tape, February 2025.

⁶ Heschel, *The Earth Is the Lord’s: The Inner World of the Jew in East Europe* (1950)

time, was his last residence. The war was not yet over, and so it was not until sometime in 1945 that one of those letters arrived at its destination.

Instead of forwarding that letter to my brother, who had by then graduated and served as a rabbi in Connecticut, a decision was made to open and read it. Perhaps it was done out of consideration for him, to soften the blow in case the message was too shocking. As I recall it, it was brief: “Everyone was killed. I survived. Send me readmission papers to the seminary.” The man who read and translated my first life signal was another Polish Jew, himself rather new at the seminary: Abraham Joshua Heschel.

Two more years passed before I arrived at the seminary.⁷ For the following three years, I sat in his class. This is a deliberate choice of words. The physical me sat in the class. But what he had to say about a merciful God, a God of justice and righteousness, a God of pathos and concern, was as distant from what I knew about who or what God really was, as was 3080 Broadway from the *Irei Ha-hareigah*, the cities of slaughter⁸ – the distance between being here and having been there.

I knew why he was speaking as he did. I had grown up in the same milieu, the same way of life. [But that was so long, long ago. That was B.H. – Before the Holocaust. Or, rather, that term [*Holocaust*] had not yet been used. But to go on now as *if* nothing]⁹ happened, I thought, was a flagrant sacrilege, a *chillul zeycher ha-kdoshim*, a profanation of the memory of the martyrs.

“Dr. Heschel, ... how dare you speak of a God who cares? Even Abraham bargained with Him. The prophets spoke of His outrage. The mystics, the Hasidim, quarreled with Him.”

But he replied: “What should have been our answer to Auschwitz? Should this people, called to be a witness to the God of mercy and compassion, persist in its witness and cling to Job’s words, ‘Even if He slay me, yet will I trust in Him’ [Job 13:15], or should this people follow the advice of Job’s wife, ‘Curse God and die!’ [Job 2:9]...?”¹⁰

It is surprising that he even quoted the alternative. But this was about the furthest he allowed himself, or his students. His answer was clear and unequivocal. And he expected the same of others. As Eugene Borowitz¹¹ states: “In the passion of his own belief, he was

⁷ She began studies in the Teachers Institute of the seminary in September 1947.

⁸ She references Chaim Nachman Bialik’s 1904 poem about the 1903 Kishinev pogrom, *Be-ir He-hareigah* (“In the City of Slaughter”), widely considered the most influential Hebrew poem of the 20th century.

⁹ This transcript fills in from her handwritten notes a 15-second gap that likely resulted from the cassette being turned over.

¹⁰ Heschel, *Israel: An Echo of Eternity* (1969)

¹¹ Rabbi Eugene B. Borowitz (1924-2016) taught theology at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion for more than 50 years.

unmoved, he had no room for skeptics.” One had the impression that he viewed the mere thought of God’s involvement in the Holocaust a greater tragedy than the tragedy itself. I thus concluded that he, like my father, like the countless myriad faithful before them, is smitten with the blind, uncompromising faith.

In *Man’s Quest for God*, he confessed: “Arriving at his highest understanding, man is reduced to stillness.”¹²

Who knows? Perhaps had Job, Jeremiah, Ezekiel lived through this, maybe they too would have been speechless. “For there is not a word in my tongue / But lo, O Lord, thou knowest it all.” [Psalm 139:4] Heschel quotes the psalm defensively. Or maybe he was suffering the way he described his people suffering through the centuries: “Sorrow was their second soul, and the vocabulary of their heart consisted of one sound: Oy.”¹³

Thus was Heschel able ultimately to triumph: “We didn’t blaspheme, we built. We knew that to repudiate God would be to continue the Holocaust.” And then, he said: “We all died in Auschwitz, yet our faith survived.” “How would the world have looked at the Jewish people if the survivors of the concentration camps had gone the path of assimilation? Flight from God? From Judaism?”¹⁴

This survivor didn’t flee, Professor Heschel. But not out of consideration at how the world would look at us – but out of a deep conviction that ours *is* a righteous way of life, and my people *is* a noble people. For I have witnessed and experienced the alternative. Which is what you, Professor Heschel, and my father, and the other saintly persons who have shaped my life and thoughts have said all along. It is this view of the Jew as the *or lagoyim*, as the “light unto the nations,” which gave them all the strength to lay down their lives if need be. This conviction they bequeathed to me. I pledge to do no less.

No, it was not easy to make my peace with God and man. Like Jacob our forefather, I, too, wrestled through a long, long night, year after year, and like Jacob I emerged victorious. Life alone was not enough of a reward for my suffering. Like Jacob, I, too, demanded a compensation, a blessing. God complied: Israel was born. Like with Jacob, the emergence of Israel constituted my personal transformation. Israel was my personal victory. People said God saved Israel. But I knew that the reverse happened: Israel saved God.

¹² Heschel, *Man’s Quest for God* (1954)

¹³ Heschel, *The Earth Is the Lord’s: The Inner World of the Jew in East Europe* (1950)

¹⁴ Heschel, *Israel: An Echo of Eternity* (1969)

I came to recognize that at the time of the Holocaust, God indeed was preoccupied with His own “final solution” to the Jewish problem. He was putting the finishing touches to the *Geulah*, the Redemption, *Shivat Tzion*, the return to Zion.

Israel: That was God’s deed. The Holocaust was the act of man.

I again put God on trial during the Six Day War, and again He didn’t let me down.

Every now and then, I would have a relapse. Not long ago, I heard Rabbi Drooz deliver a beautiful scholarly lecture on the philosophy of Abraham Joshua Heschel. Again ... the accuser in me prevailed. “Rabbi Drooz,” I inquired, “where does the Holocaust fit into this scheme of things?” Rabbi Drooz kindly, unbeknown to me, solicitously wrote to Professor Heschel. And back came the reply: “Not an hour goes by without my feeling the unbearable shock at what happened. I have been trying for 25 years to put together some notes I have written on this issue.”

This I [*unclear*]. And it is for this reason, too, that I am pained that he went so soon. So much unfinished work. In mourning the *churban*, the destruction, we bewail not only the actual losses of life, and the Jewish [spiritual] treasure house, but also the potential losses of lives yet unborn, thoughts yet unthought, ideas yet not expressed, worlds not yet discovered.

So it is with the passing of Abraham Joshua Heschel. I am convinced that somewhere in that brilliant mind and in that passionate heart, there was the one pronouncement to the memory of the Six Million yet unuttered. I have a feeling that someday he may have come forward with a companion volume to *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*, and called it *The Holocaust: The Cry of Eternity*. For isn’t it that cry that resounds in the echo?

Is this a eulogy?

Perhaps not. But I know of no way to pay greater tribute to my teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel than by this, my public *Ani Ma’amin*, my confession of faith, as a testimony to the deep, unwavering, unconditional faith he has taught me.

“No hour goes by without my feeling the unbearable shock of what happened.” Though the doctor’s certificate may read that Abraham Joshua Heschel died of a heart attack, I know that he died of a broken heart.

“We all died in Auschwitz,” he states. Thus I mourn him not as the scholar, or philosopher, the theologian, or even the teacher – but as one of them, that select company of the righteous and the pure, *k’Zohar ha-Rakia* ¹⁵, who died *al kiddush Hashem*, for the

¹⁵ Daniel 12:3: “as the shining of the firmament”

sanctification of God's name. For there will hopefully be other scholars and philosophers, theologians and teachers. But there will never again be another Polish Jewry, a community of prophets and of saints, whose illustrious son Abraham Joshua Heschel has now rejoined them. *Yehi zichro mevorach*. May his memory be a blessing.