

HESCHEL IN JERUSALEM

interviewed by PINHAS H. PELI*

Shortly before his untimely death in 1972, the late Professor Abraham Joshua Heschel paid a visit to Jerusalem. On that occasion, five conversations conducted with him were broadcast on Israel Television. The following is the fourth conversation which was screened on December 26, 1972. Professor Heschel is talking to Dr. Pinhas Peli.

PELI: Professor Heschel, you are considered by many to be the rabbi's rabbi, a teacher of teachers. Hundreds of American rabbis have the honour of calling themselves your students. Not only rabbis but clergymen of other faiths as well read and study your books, which reach the larger reading public as well. I personally am aware that your writings have had an immense impact on religious thought in our times. I also know, for a fact that people have changed their life styles and their way of thinking as a result of reading your books. There are those who have come to understand and observe the Sabbath after reading your book on this topic. The two books which are most essential for a perception of your philosophy are, of course: *Man is Not Alone*, and *God in Search of Man*. We would like to take this opportunity – during your present pilgrimage to Jerusalem – to ask you something which has been troubling many of us. Is man really not alone? In God's search for

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(*Five Conversations with Abraham Joshua Heschel*; eds. A.H. Elhanani, Pinhas Peli, Carl Stern. Jerusalem: Mosad Abraham Joshua Heschel, 1975). This is the fourth conversation, which has been translated by Irvin B. Fishel. Dr. Pinhas H. Peli is Senior Lecturer of Jewish philosophy at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Beersheva, and Director of the Abraham Joshua Heschel Institute in Jerusalem.

man, when He continually asks us, as you claim He does, the same question which He asked of Adam – “Where are you?” – does He find man? How will He find him? Or, how will man find the path to God Who is calling to him? How is it possible to find faith in a generation whose overriding preoccupation is the crisis of faith?

HESCHEL: The question which you ask is very important, even crucial. Nor is it my intention, Heaven forbid, to undermine its importance by giving a brief answer, since our time is limited. I would like to discuss at least, a few basic assumptions: we must first differentiate between faith and articles of faith. Most people don't differentiate between the two, though they are not similar at all. What are articles of faith? It is a kind of vital, internal response within man. It is a perspective on the whole of reality and a tie to the One Who is above that apparent reality. In saying that faith is a perspective, what do we mean? Consider for example, that in the Middle Ages mankind believed that the earth was the center of the universe. Today men no longer believe that, but they are convinced that the individual, man himself, is central to our concept of life and the center of creation. Consequently, man looks at the world, at reality, as material to be exploited, as a source of his own pleasure. He is insensitive to the beauty, the genius and the mystery of reality.

PELI: That is indeed the problem: the man who no longer feels, who has lost his potential for faith, should we give up on him or is there a way of reawakening it in him?

HESCHEL: I would say that there is an urgent need for education in the area of faith. This is something that is missing here in Israel. There is a great need here for a spiritually oriented endeavour, for education. Nobody sits quietly, and thinks: “What do I see, what do I hear?” No one lifts his eyes to the heavens to see Who created all of this. Man looks at the world prosaically, matter-of-factly. But the truth of the matter is that there is nothing routine whatsoever in reality. Each moment is an event. If man doesn't know how to overcome the limitations of his thinking, of his habitual way of looking at the world, then he will never attain true faith. Faith is not the repetition of words heard from the lips of other men, it flows from the wellspring in the heart of the man who is open to reality. The way in which I relate to this table, for example, dictates the way I relate to the eternal.

PELI: Perhaps you can explain yourself more clearly. What can there be about a relationship with this table that leads one to faith? I understand, for example, a scientific approach towards it, as I can list, in a scientific manner, the components and elements of which the table is made. But, how does the table indicate how I relate to the beyond?

HESCHEL: Perhaps I'll begin with an example which is simpler and discuss the table afterwards. There is a rule in Judaism: when a man takes a drink of water, and we know that nothing is more commonplace than water, he must preface his action by saying a blessing. He's thirsty, he wants to drink. But, he is told: Wait! Don't

hurry, first you must make a blessing. The drinking of a glass of water is a simple enough matter, but knowing which blessing to make is not. The man must think: I am about to drink something very ordinary; I drink water every day and so do people all over the world. Is it then, routine? Not at all! I must first make the blessing: "Blessed art Thou, O Lord, King of the Universe." I am thirsty, I am eager to quench my thirst, but I am told: Wait! First you must be reminded of the awesome mystery that the world was created by a single word of the Creator "Who brought forth all things by His word." That is to say that we must relate even to simple things within the perspective of the eternal. Now, look at the table again. The table is made of wood, therefore it comes from a tree. Is there anything more beautiful or mysterious than a tree which stands stretching its arms heavenwards in the midst of the field?

PELI: Do you mean to say that when we look at the table we must see the tree from which it was made? That we must learn to see beyond the surface?

HESCHEL: Exactly. The plants, the trees and all that is beneath them — their roots, and the sap running in them, and the growth of the tree itself; all these are events which fill man with wonder and astonishment.

PELI: Would you be willing to admit that in the world in which we live, in which we are always so harried, we no longer have the time to stop and think of such things? Is man, surrounded as he is by technology, capable of reflecting and engaging in thought as deep as that? Aren't we asking too much of him?

HESCHEL: Why is it so impossible? If we don't think, if we don't learn how to look and to meditate, we will be committing nothing less than spiritual suicide. We want to live, but what is the meaning of life, of human life? There is something in the meaning of the word "life" which points toward an existence endowed with special characteristics. One of those is the power of amazement, the feeling of the miraculous, the ability to see the world in a manner which is not merely mechanical, to look at it as a free and independent person who can see and respond to the wonder and beauty of life. Man's ability for amazement and wonder is essential.

PELI: We are aware of the turmoil which is part of campus life today. You appear frequently at various universities. Have you found an awakening there, or is the younger generation also caught up in the same mad rush which does not allow us to look deeply at life and to examine our existence?

HESCHEL: I think it is important for us to remember how we felt in the fifties in America. In those days we would sit together — scholars, professors, and teachers — and complain about the younger generation. Youth, we said, takes absolutely no interest in any serious question, neither in politics nor ethics, not in intellectual revolution nor in art. Their only interests are career oriented. All they want is success, whether in business or in one of the professions. Suddenly a new generation

appeared and rose up against these, what we call (in American Yiddish) “alrightniks.” This new generation is seeking a meaningful existence. What had taken place in America before this? Philosophy, to give one example, had been relegated to a corner. Instead of dealing with the meaning of existence and morality, they were only interested in defining logic. Scholars worked diligently toward a linguistic analysis of the Babel languages, but ignored those things which oppress the young. The youth of today all over America is searching, seeking. I know them well. One of the characteristics of man is that he must from time to time raise himself up to a higher spiritual level. The Jewish tradition always provided opportunities for such spiritual uplifting. Even eating on an ordinary weekday was not simply that, but was accompanied by a blessing. Before eating comes the spiritual uplifting of saying the blessing with the proper feeling and intention. Daily prayer is also a form of spiritual uplifting. The Sabbath is a day set aside for spiritual uplifting, for acquiring an additional soul. A “second soul” is not a luxury, it is essential to man. On the other hand, technological existence is only on one plane. Due to the strength of their need to rise to a higher level, many of our youth make use of drugs which cause them a great deal of pain and sorrow. I see in this plague a blessing in the form of a curse. What do I mean, by this? Perhaps mankind will see what is going on in the world and will realize that without spiritual uplifting, without faith in the creator of the universe, existence is intolerable. Perhaps animals can survive without spiritual uplifting but mankind cannot.

PELI: I don’t know if you will be pleased to hear that this particular “blessing” has already reached us. Perhaps we should move our center of interest from the world at large to the confines of life in Israel. I know that you are no stranger here, your book on the religious aspects of the State of Israel appeared only recently. Certainly you have noticed that there is an awakening of youth here as well, and that they too are returning to the sources of Judaism. But there is a feeling of despair at not knowing where to begin. We have a vast tradition contained in thousands of books all of which seem to have turned their backs to us. The question that confronts us is: How do I open them? What do I start with? How does one reach the inner illumination which is in Judaism? Teach us.

HESCHEL: I think that one of the mistakes often made is to represent Judaism as based solely on the cornerstone of Law and Rule. While, without the Law there is no Judaism, we forget that it has a double foundation: *halakhah* and *aggadah*, which are based both on deeds and on study. To our great sorrow, the latter is much neglected in Israel. There is not enough genuine concern for man’s spiritual problems. One must look beyond and see the person within the Jew and thus recognize his plight. The Law in itself cannot provide answers to all these problems.

PELI: Don’t your words echo those complaints which were first voiced by the original teachers of the hasidim? I know that you are a descendant of those great spiritual leaders, the Magid of Mezerich, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, Rabbi Israel of Rizin and others, and that you have recently completed a major work on the Rabbi of Kotzk. Isn’t your claim identical to the one heard at the beginning of Hasidism? How did they deal with this problem?

HESCHEL: I would like to remark that the claim was first made long before the birth of Hasidism; in fact, it is in the words of the Prophets when they opposed a religious life composed merely of forms practiced by a knowledgeable elite. The religion of Israel means more than following rules and fulfilling legal obligations. There is also a need to nourish the soul, which Law and Rule simply can never satisfy.

PELI: Why must we go so far afield to obtain this nourishment. Here in the State of Israel we daily fulfill one of the primary ordinances of Judaism, due to our efforts to maintain the state and to defend it. Can't this reveal to us the inner illuminatory power of Judaism and bring us back to the tradition of our fathers?

HESCHEL: Yes, but the problem is that to many, the State of Israel, one of the greatest miracles in human history has also become routine. We relate to the State of Israel as though it were an ordinary matter, but it is something entirely miraculous, altogether mysterious. We often get the impression, even at a distance, that the religious miracle which is the State of Israel is totally disregarded. It is seen without the holiness and wonder which are attached to it.

PELI: How should it be regarded? I would like to quote from your book on the State of Israel – *Israel, An Echo of Eternity* – which (the late) President Zalman Shazar ordered to be translated into Hebrew: “Many are the curses and the thoughts of evil in this world, but few indeed are the prayers. Let Jerusalem become the well-spring of prayer, the end of anger and the cessation of violence. Let Jerusalem be the dwelling place of mercy for all mankind and everywhere will be heard the sigh of man for whose sake they have awakened mercy in Jerusalem.” Thus you have written. And I ask you – How will Jerusalem send forth this good news to the world? Who will bring her to the point of becoming in reality the wellspring of prayer and the dwelling place of mercy.

HESCHEL: I would say that hope is in the hands of the few rather than the many. Many come to the State of Israel to find meaning in their lives, and no one helps them. Many young people come looking, searching and go back home empty-handed. No one teaches them about Judaism, no one tells them of the miraculous dimension of life in Israel. The pioneers and their self-sacrifice have been all but forgotten. Tel-Hai is not remembered, they only see the Hilton. No effort is made to show them how deeply rooted the people are in the soil of this land, among them the first Jewish pioneers who came to Israel with all of their energies and their very souls captivated by the dream of building a just and righteous society.

PELI: Yes indeed, one really needs to remember that it was the dream of founding a Jewish state which brought those pioneer settlers who came to make the wastelands bloom and to build a nation; and that all this has come to pass. Today we live in what is the realization of the dream of generations. Where to begin? Perhaps by means of Hasidism? By means of the Sabbath of which you have written? Or by means of the study of Torah? There are many paths but, no clear-cut road before

us. I ask a world-embracing question and expect an easy answer. How shall we ascend to the house of God? Where is its threshold?

HESCHEL: I would certainly say that there is a need for the study of Torah and for the study of our Jewish sources. But one must know what to study. We have a vast wealth of sources and must open them to that place for which the human heart is yearning. You mentioned my soon to be published book on the Rabbi of Kotzk. He and others like him were sharply aware of the high degree of impurity found in western civilization. Mankind today finds itself in a state of disappointment and is looking for meaning. The Rabbi of Kotzk and his like tried to teach others how to elevate their spiritual communication. They showed the world that unconditional love is found in our midst.

PELI: Then this is the good news which will go forth to the world from Jerusalem. Allow me to conclude this conversation with a passage from your writings on Jerusalem: "We are a nation of orphans. We have come within the walls of the city to ask after the widow Jerusalem and behold we have found that the widow has become a bride. She holds us by the very forelocks of our heads and we find ourselves once again at the feet of prophets. We are the harp and David is the player." I hope that we shall be deemed worthy to hear, together with you, the sound of the music which David will play on the harp we are preparing for him.

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