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ON OUR COVER

Abraham Joshua Heschel in his office at the Jewish Theological Seminary, 1960.

Photograph by John H. Popper.

Courtesy of the Ratner Center for the Study of Conservative Judaism, Jewish Theological Seminary.

Heschel's
Torah min ha-shamayim
Ancient Theology and
Contemporary Autobiography

Gordon Tucker

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If it is true that one gets a good glimpse into the workings of a person's mind by paying attention to the structure of the language that he or she uses to express thoughts, then someone should surely do a study of what seems to me to be a phenomenally large number of books, particularly among philosophers, the titles of which consist of three words or terms strung together. An early example was Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. Much more recently, there is Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*. I might even mention the ever-popular *Gödel, Escher, Bach*.

These are mere exemplars. The list goes on and on, and you can verify this by looking through any academic book catalogue. My sense is that this abundance of triads must signify *something* about modes of thought in the intellectual worlds of the authors, though whether it reflects a sort of neo-Hegelianism or some other phenomemon I can't say.

On the other hand, the work of Abraham Joshua Heschel, and particularly *Torah min ha-shamayim*, though not solely in that work by any means, presents us not with triads, but rather with *dyads*. They, too, come in great abundance; in such abundance, in fact, that it must signify *something*. My strong sense here, too, as a careful reader of his works, is that we have here one of many windows into the deeper recesses of Heschel's thought.

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It will be useful to list just a few of the Heschelian dyads that dot the pages of *Torah min ha-shamayim*. We need look no further than the chapter headings themselves:

דרכי האדם ודרכי המקום
נוסח בבל ונוסח ארץ ישראל
איש הפשט ואיש המסתורין
הנביא שותף או כלי¹

Again, the list extends further than these few examples, and goes far beyond the mere names of the chapters. Volumes II and III are, after all, primarily a working out of the implications of two concepts that Heschel also considered to be mutual inverses living in tension: תורה מן השמים and לא בשמים היא. Indeed, in Volume III, he called these two concepts שתי פרשיות באמונה.² And, most obviously of all, the *entire* work is presented to the reader as an intellectual biography and genealogy of רבי ישמעאל and רבי עקיבא, the two אבות העולם who are foils one for the other. The thoroughly dyadic nature of this work is, in fact, dizzying.

Leszek Kolakowski, following Henri Bergson, said that every philosopher writes the same book throughout his life.³ In some sense, he or she says only one thing, in that all of the works he or she produces are given impetus and meaning by one leading idea. And often enough, that idea is closely associated with the thinker's own history and/or inner psychology.

A powerful case can certainly be made for this in Heschel's instance. Consider this: In 1944, he published a monograph entitled "The Quest for Certainty in Saadia's Philosophy." At the very beginning of that work, he wrote that "philosopher's books are not responsa. They are not mirrors reflecting other people's problems, but rather *windows*, which give us a view of the *author's* soul." Heschel gave much away about himself in this line, and in the following line as well, which read: "Philosophers do not expend their power and passion unless they themselves are affected, originally or vicariously." And so, Heschel told us, Saadia wrote about certainty because of "quandaries knocking at his own heart."⁴

The logic of this trenchant observation is this: If it is true about Saadia writing of certainty, it must also be true about Heschel *writing* of Saadia writing of certainty!

It seems to me significant that Heschel called this essay "The Quest for Certainty." My colleague, Lawrence Perlman, has written of Heschel's

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Torah min ha-shamayim be-aspaklaryah shel ha-dorot*, Volumes 1 and 2 (London: Soncino, 1962 and 1965), pp. i, xvi, 13 (Volume 1); p. 264 (Volume 2).

² *Torah min ha-shamayim*, Volume 3 (Jerusalem: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1990), p. 23

³ Leszek Kolakowski, *Husserl and the Search for Certitude* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975).

⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Quest for Certainty in Saadia's Philosophy* (New York: Philip Feldheim, 1944), p. 1.

They did not know how to take anything for granted. Everything had to have a reason, and they were more interested in reasons than in things. . . . It is easy to belittle such an attitude of mind and to call it unpractical, unworldly. But what is nobler than the unpractical spirit? The soul is sustained by the regard for that which transcends all immediate purposes. The sense of the transcendent is the heart of culture, the very essence of humanity. A civilization that is devoted exclusively to the utilitarian is at bottom not different from barbarism. The world is sustained by unworldliness.⁹

That last sentence is a Heschelian turn of phrase if ever there was one. The entire passage contains strong, polemical words. Heschel did not use terms such as “barbarism” lightly. What we have here is yet another, though closely related, dyad that also beset Heschel, and constituted a “quandary knocking at his heart”: **Transcendence and Utilitarianism**—or perhaps we might say **transcendent truth and practical truth**.

It is perhaps in the work published at the close of Heschel’s life, *A Passion for Truth*, that this theme of dyadic tension reaches its most poignant expression. Heschel began *A Passion for Truth* with a prologue entitled, “Why I Had to Write this Book,” and speaks of yet another dyad—the Baal Shem and the Kotzker:

The earliest fascination I can recall is associated with the Baal Shem, whose parables disclosed some of the first insights I gained as a child. He remained a model too sublime to follow yet too overwhelming to ignore.

It was in my ninth year that the presence of Reb Menahem Mendl of Kotzk, known as the Kotzker, entered my life. Since then he has remained a steady companion and a haunting challenge. Although he often stunted me, he also urged me to confront perplexities that I might have preferred to evade.

Years later I realized that, in being guided by both the Baal Shem Tov and the Kotzker, I had allowed two forces to carry on a struggle within me. One was occasionally mightier than the other. But who was to prevail, which was to be my guide? Both spoke convincingly, and each proved right on one level yet questionable on another.

In a very strange way, I found my soul at home with the Baal Shem but driven by the Kotzker. Was it good to live with one’s heart torn between the joy of Mezbizh and the anxiety of Kotzk? . . . Was this a life a man would choose to live? I had no choice: my heart was in Mezbizh, my mind in Kotzk. I was taught about inexhaustible mines of meaning by the Baal Shem; from the Kotzker I learned to detect immense mountains of absurdity standing in the way. The one taught me song, the other—silence. . . .

The Baal Shem dwelled in my life like a lamp, while the Kotzker

⁹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Earth is the Lord’s* (New York: H. Schuman, 1950), pp. 54–55.

struck like lightning. To be sure, lightning is more authentic. Yet one can trust a lamp, put confidence in it; one can live in peace with a lamp. . . .

. . . The Baal Shem helped me to refine my sense of immediate mystery; the Kotzker warned me of the constant peril of forfeiting authenticity.¹⁰

There is good reason to make at least a loose identification between the dyadic Baal Shem/Kotzker and Akiva/Yishmael. One example of why this is so: Heschel himself tells us that the Kotzker, like Yishmael, took a very dim view of theurgic claims, and advocated a more down-to-earth, rational point of view.

But the connection between Yishmael and the rejection of theurgy—and thus Heschel's perceived connection between Yishmael and Kotzker (and, apparently, Akiva and the Baal Shem)—can only be seen upon a somewhat fuller consideration of the work in which Heschel's ubiquitous dyads are given their most consistent and thorough working up—that is, in *Torah min ha-shamayim*.

An important introductory word: terminology can get confusing in discussing the contents of this work. Heschel himself, and several authors following him, speak of Akiva as the figure who represents “transcendence.”¹¹ This is true, however, only in a very narrow, limited sense. We should, perhaps, let it be clear at the outset, as Heschel was clear, that he was speaking paradigmatically, and not historically—that is how he understood the appellation אבות העולם (as something like “eternal paradigms”). Akiva represented the point of view that the Torah had a transcendence to it—that it contained within it a reality far beyond human three-dimensionality and finite intellect. The Torah was *God's* Torah, even God's surrogate on earth; it partook of the presence of God, and therefore of God's infinitude. It is worth a moment's dwelling on this in order to emphasize that although in *this* sense Akiva represents Torah as transcendent, in the wider sense—the sense that recurs throughout *Torah min ha-shamayim*—Akiva represents *God's immanence* in the world. God dwells near or in us because the Torah has been revealed to us, and the Torah is written in God's language, not ours. Hence the need for esoteric exegesis arises. And hence the view that Torah, Temple, and other sacred objects and institutions predated *revelation* and even, in some versions, *creation* itself! Hence, also, God's participation in, and identification with our sufferings (the Akivan doctrine of יסורין של אהבה, on which Heschel dwells). And conversely, it is Yishmael, again taken as a paradigm of thought, who represents the transcendence of *God*. God, being infinitely beyond us, unable or unwilling to dwell among us, gives us a communication, necessarily partial and finite, of the divine will, in a Torah which is thus, necessarily, written כלשון בני אדם. Therefore, the Temple is understood in this view to have

¹⁰ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *A Passion for Truth* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1995), pp. xiv, xv.

¹¹ Heschel, *Torah min ha-shamayim be-aspaklaryah shel ha-dorot*, Vol. 1, p. iv.

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come about in its conception *after* the sin of the Golden Calf (for prior to that, it was not needed for human discipline). Hence, the cold, Yishmaelian response to suffering embodied in the phrase *מי כמוך באלמים — מי כמוך באלים* — *מי כמוך רואה בעלבון בניו ושותק*. And hence, to get back finally to the comment on the Kotzker, Yishmael would *indeed* take a dim view of theurgic claims. A Yishmaelian would say, in the face of such claims: *על האלהים בשמים ואתה על הארץ על כן יהיו דבריך מעטים*.

Akiva represents the encompassing divine presence—the point of view in which the prophet is a vessel. Hence there is no meaningful distinction between form and content. Yishmael represents the *autonomy* which is the human birthright, the point of view which sees the prophet (and *a fortiori* the Sage) as a partner, and active participant. Hence form is just form, and often has simply the utility of easing communication.

And so does his characterization of these two paradigms continue right through the three volumes.

Rivka Horwitz, in an early review of the first two volumes, said:

יש ושתי השיטות מופיעות כשני זרמים בתוך היהדות. ויש והן מאבק בתוך נפשו של האדם.¹²

There is no doubt, of course, that the soul that she had in mind was, specifically, the author's. Moreover, she alerted us to the fact that the style and language of this book seem to confirm this:

יש סגנון הספר הוא שירי ומאופק כאילו עומד לפנינו משורר לוחט המדבר על עינים הנוגעים בנימי נשמתו.¹³

So much can be said about Heschel's rich language in this extraordinary work. I'll confine myself, of necessity, to a few points directly relating to this overall issue of dyadic struggles. For I argue that these dualisms affected Heschel's language, and produced, in particular, some noteworthy and memorable word plays—semantic reversals and antinomies.

Perhaps the most striking of these is his statement, in Volume Three, in the midst of a complaint about how the rich metaphor of *Torah min ha-shamayim* had been flattened into a sterile, divisive dogma (a dogma which unquestionably drew its strength from the Akivan paradigm), Heschel says that the real issue is not believing in *Torah min ha-shamayim* but in being able to perceive *shamayim min-hatorah*. Moreover, he refers to the Mishnah in Sanhedrin 10, to which the dogmatists themselves appeal, and sets it on its head. One must perceive *Torah min ha-shamayim*, i.e. the wondrous substratum *underlying* Torah: *וכל הכופר בפלא אין לו חלק בעולם הזה. ועל אחת מעלה¹⁴*

Or this: In speaking of *יסורין של אהבה*, the religious importance in the Akivan paradigm of emphasizing God's immanence while enduring suffering,

¹² Rivka Horwitz, "Iyun hadash b'makshevet ha'tanaim," *Molad*, Vol. 23 (1965), p. 241.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

¹⁴ *Torah min ha-shamayim*, Vol. 3, p. 31.

of sharing pain and oppression with God, Heschel is aware that *community solidarity* is a greater principle for most Jews than is the idea of a God with us in suffering. And so, he subverts the quintessential text of *horizontal* solidarity, the answer to the רשע in the Haggadah, as follows:

השואל: מה הגלות הזאת לנו? אומרים לו: לנו ולא לו? מי שהוציא אותו מן הכלל בעיקר!¹⁵

Faced with this sort of language play, clever but pungent reversals, we ought to ask of Heschel what Heschel asked of Akiva, with respect to Akiva's propensity for unusual exegesis:

וכי מתוך שהיה חד ושנון. אהב את המסובך והמחודד?

Was it merely intellectual games? Heschel didn't believe that of Akiva. And I don't believe it of Heschel.

His language and his message truly converge. In *Torah min ha-shamayim*, there is scarcely a distinction between form and content (just as Akiva's exegesis made no such distinction). Heschel told us that one cannot understand the words of the second century rabbis:

מתוך שלוות נפש של אדם העומד בחוץ ומציץ בפנים.¹⁶

Again, we can apply the same words to the author himself.

These dyadic struggles, which we have catalogued here only in part, *were* in fact wired into נשמתו.

The immanent God of Akiva was unquestionably the world in which he grew up, the world of *The Earth is the Lord's*, the world of the Baal Shem, and of the palpable nearness of God. This was the realm of the eternal, all-encompassing transcendent truth of Torah, there to be discovered through esoteric exegesis at which the kabbalists and the Hasidim excelled.

The transcendent of God of Yishmael, on the other hand, was unquestionably the world to which he moved—Vilna, Berlin, Cincinnati, New York. It was the world of Maimonides, as Heschel saw that world.

The neat, but almost obsessive, categorization of the two major trunk lines in rabbinic and post-rabbinic Jewish thought is a chart of his inner struggle with these two worlds. That Akiva's world was his mother's milk, as it were, accounts for his confident statement that Akiva had won the hearts and minds of Israel. How could it seem otherwise for a son of Medzibozh? That he had moved on to another world also accounts for his *wistful* description of that victory:

הכל תלוי במזל אפילו ספר תורה שבהיכל. ורבי ישמעאל לא שחק לו מזל. פטישו מצא הסדן. אבל קולו לא מצא את האוזן.¹⁷

These are words that betray a desire to see an imbalance *redressed*. To make the fight within him fair, without a predetermined outcome. And thus, we

¹⁵ *Torah min ha-shamayim*, Vol. 1, p. 86.

¹⁶ *Torah min ha-shamayim*, Vol. 1, p. 83.

¹⁷ *Torah min ha-shamayim*, Vol. 1, p. lix.

have the widely noted “tilt” toward Yishmael in this work. It was a way of understanding and presenting his own odyssey.

Actually, it is somewhat more complicated than that, for the “tilt” to Yishmael is not everywhere evident. On the contrary, although Yishmael seems clearly to get preferred in matters of autonomy of reason, in exegesis, the conventionality of worship, and the freedom of the prophet, Akiva seems to get the clear nod when it comes to *ההשתתפות בצרותיהם של ישראל*. In some areas of life, we like to have space, whereas in others, we need the hovering Presence. This is not a mere side observation. The vacillation is important to note, for I believe that Heschel did not seek a victory for one or the other. He undoubtedly did not seek, for example, a Krochmal-type resolution of two opposites. On the contrary, Horwitz was precisely correct when she noted:

השניות קיימת עד הסוף

And Tamar Kohlberg, too, stated perceptively that:

מתחים אלו משתימים את הפרדכסליות המאפיינת את הקיום הדתי.¹⁸

Heschel seems to have come, by Volume Three, to value a continued dialectic between the two. I shall give just one pointed demonstration of this: Near the end of Volume Three, Heschel deals with the tension between *הלכה כבתראי* and *אם הראשונים כמלאכים אנו כבני אדם*. In the chapter entitled “הלכה כבתראי,” he brings impressive evidence from Ibn Ezra, Isaiah di-Trani, Joseph Karo, the Maharik, and the Tashbetz that *הלכה כבתראי* must carry the day. One has the fleeting sense in this chapter of a man arrived at a resolution, honoring his past, but tilting unmistakably to the Yishmaelian view of his intellectual adulthood.

But it turns out to be a false cadence. The tonic chord comes only with a shift, to the Rashba, who said that he could decisively refute his teacher, the Ramban’s, point of view on a legal matter. Yet he went on to say that:

אם מצאת להרמבין שהורה כן. אני אומר שכבר הורה הזקן. ואין משיבין את הארי לאחר מיטה.¹⁹

Torah min ha-shamayim reveals itself as a study of the Rabbis’ theology, but no less of Heschel’s depth theology. It is, in that sense, a moving *tour de force*.

A haunting question, however, remains: Having been moved to unravel for us, and for himself, the threads that comprise the tapestry of rabbinic thought, it appears that Heschel would dearly love to weave them back together again, to the state of dialectic with one another. Having become *conscious* of their separate existences and their antagonism, however, can that reweaving anymore be done?

¹⁸ Tamar Kohlberg, “Bein musar l’teologia b’*Torah min ha-shamayim be-aspaklaryah shel ha-dorot*,” *Da’at*, Vol. 29 (Summer 1992).

¹⁹ *Torah min ha-shamayim*, Vol. 3, p. 149.