

## Aggadic Man: The Poetry and Rabbinic Thought of Abraham Joshua Heschel

Alan Brill

**Abstract:** This essay analyses two recently translated works of R. Abraham Joshua Heschel, illustrating how he reads classic texts through modern eyes. It focuses on Heschel's view of Rabbinic Judaism as *aggadah*, and his theology of revelation that includes a Heavenly Torah and Torah from Sinai as elements of Torah study. Using the tools of poetry and comparative religion, Heschel presents an experiential Torah of the heart that offers an understanding of rabbinic thought through the generations.

**Biography:** R. Dr. Alan Brill is the founder and director of Kavvanah: Center for Jewish Thought. He is the author of *Thinking God: The Mysticism of R. Zadok of Lublin* and is presently writing a book on Judaism and other religions. His previous contributions to *The Edah Journal* include “Worlds Destroyed, Worlds Rebuilt: The Religious Thought of Rabbi Yehudah Amital” (*Sivan* 5766), “An Ideal Rosh Yeshiva: By His Light: Character and Values in the Service of God and Leaves of Faith by Rav Aharon Lichtenstein” (*Tammuz* 5765) and “Judaism in Culture: Beyond Bifurcation of Torah and Mada” (*Nisan* 5764).



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# Aggadic Man: The Poetry and Rabbinic Thought of Abraham Joshua Heschel

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**R.** Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972), one of the significant Jewish theologians of the twentieth century, taught modern American Jews to speak about God. He capped off his full theological career with activism for civil rights and protest against the Vietnam War. Most readers of Heschel know his later works in English, especially their calls for awe, wonder and a sense of the ineffable in our lives.

The recent translation of Heschel's early Yiddish poetry collection *The Ineffable Name of God: Man*<sup>1</sup> provides a fresh understanding of his idioms of direct relationship with God—views not previously available in his later theological works. More importantly, the newly translated volume of Heschel's *Heavenly Torah*<sup>2</sup>, which Heschel considered his major work, now allows the reader to consider the standard presentation of Heschel's theological positions. This essay explores how Heschel sought to present the pre-modern texts on revelation as a means of reawakening the religious sense of revelation, as mediated through various modern idioms.

## Poetry—*The Ineffable Name of God: Man*

In 1933 Heschel already invited his readers to experience a tangible sense of divine presence

in his poetry. Heschel's early poems thus serve as a wonderful introduction to his thought: we can see in them Heschel's core goals before his exposure to formal academic training and his distraction by phenomenology, aesthetics, and comparative religion.<sup>3</sup>

In these poems Heschel asks how we are to overcome the indifference of the world around us to God. "It is only God who still believes in God," he argues (181). Rather than relying on existentialism, Heschel's method produces an answer to God through the *in zikh* (thing itself) school of Yiddish poetry. Following its method, Heschel seeks to capture an expressionistic mood of the moment in itself—in this case an expressionistic sense of the divine as an identity with God and an empathy with divine pain.<sup>4</sup>

Am I not—you? Are you not—I?  
When a need pains You, alarm me!  
When You miss a human being  
Tear open my door!  
You live in Yourself! You live in me. (31)

This concern for God and the expressionistic portrayal of closeness to God, quickly reminds one of Rainier Maria Rilke's *Book of Hours*. Rilke writes about his relationship to God, "I want to mirror Your image to its fullest perfection." Heschel demurs, however, stating "I didn't need to study in Rilke's *beder* to know there is a God in the world"

<sup>1</sup> *The Ineffable Name of God--Man: Poems*, translated from the Yiddish by Morton M. Leifman; introduction by Edward K. Kaplan, (New York : Continuum, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> *Heavenly Torah As Refracted Through the Generations*, edited and translated from the Hebrew with commentary by Gordon Tucker with Leonard Levin, (New York:: Continuum, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of Heschel's early career, see Edward Kaplan and Samuel Dresner, *Abraham Joshua Heschel, Prophetic Witness* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> For another *in zikh* religious poet, see *Selected Poems of Jacob Glatstein* (October House: June 1973). In contrast to Heschel's piety, the cosmopolitanism of his contemporaries is presented in Ruth Wisse, "1935-6, a Year in the life of Yiddish Literature" *Studies in Jewish Culture in Honour of Chone Shmeruk* (edited by Israel Bartal, Ezra Mendelsohn, Chava Turniansky, Jerusalem, 1993) 83-103.

(13).

Like the prophets of yore, Heschel felt called by God; he pleaded with God, directly beseeching Him to deliver “a message from You. I cannot curse as justly as did Jeremiah... You are meant to help here, Oh God... I will fulfill your duty, pay your debts” (33). As a twentieth-century prophet whose actions bespeak God’s presence and message on earth, Heschel felt God’s direct word since “God follows me everywhere” (57).

Charles Taylor describes how modern man, having lost the fixed order of traditional society, uses his individualistic works to redirect attention from this loss to a recovery by maintaining traditional sensibility:

Rilke speaks of angels. But his angels are not to be understood by their place in the traditional defined order. Rather we have to triangulate to the meaning of the term through the whole range of images with which Rilke articulates his sense of things... We cannot get at them through a medieval treatise on the ranks of cherubim and seraphim, but we have to pass through this articulation of Rilke’s sensibility.<sup>5</sup>

The traditional public orders of meaning are no longer viable, Taylor suggests. We have only the articulation of a modern author trying to recapture the traditional meaning. In Rilke’s case, angels will never be known again through philosophy, science, or theology independent of the articulated human sensibility. For example, modern science no longer uses the great chain of being. Angels, therefore, are not part of human sensibility. But almost as if mirroring Rilke’s gap from the divine, Heschel’s sensibility offers the direct presence of God in a world indifferent to God, one no longer part of medieval metaphysics,

kabbalistic hierarchies, or a larger order. Rather than relying on traditional hierarchy, Heschel provides a kabbalistic and Hasidic sensibility that is mediated through his poetic imagination.

Heschel eventually discovered the distractions and joys of academic theology, and wrote his dissertation on the experiential nature of prophecy. He laid important groundwork for his later work on revelation by using the phenomenological method of comparative religion of Gerardus Van de Leeuw, as taught by his advisor Alfred Bertholet. In his dissertation (see below for citations), Heschel argued that biblical prophecy, distinct from the experience of other seers and mystics, is non-ecstatic and gives an intuition of an ethical doctrine.

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*Religion derives from God’s call to man.*

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Heschel’s defense of religion also made generous use of the early neo-orthodox theology of Karl Barth, which openly rejects the liberal understanding of religion as serving man. Heschel reasoned instead that religion derives from God’s call to man. Religion reaches beyond the autonomous, rational, Kantian world of science to acknowledge a revelatory truth. One can find variants in Heschel’s writings of Barth’s early neo-orthodox statement that the Bible is God’s anthropology, and not man’s theology.<sup>6</sup>

Yet for a poet to combine Barth’s submission to the divine with the human realm of intuitive experiences of phenomenology and poetry creates an implicit tension—one that runs throughout Heschel’s writing. Heschel remains in oscillation between neo-orthodoxy and comparative religion, between the other-worldly elements of the Torah and the human poetic and experiential elements, between heaven and earth. Heschel seeks to capture that tension, which lies at the core of

<sup>5</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1991), p. 84.

<sup>6</sup> “It is not the right human thoughts about God which form the content of the Bible, but the right divine thoughts about men.” Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man (Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie)*, trans. D. Horton, (New York: Harper & Row, 1957 [orig. pu. 1928]), p. 43. On the Barthian element in Heschel’s theory of revelation, see David Novak, “Divine Revelation,” in *Modern Judaism; an Oxford Guide* (2005), pp. 278-289; id., “Briefly Noted- Heavenly Torah as Refracted through the Generations,” *First Things* (November: 2005), p. 59.

religion and his own soul.

### The Torah of the Heart

The second newly translated work is *Heavenly Torah*, a translation of *Torah min ha-shamayim be-aspaqlaria shel ha-dorot*. Here we see Heschel's most serious engagement with rabbinic texts as he opens up new vistas in rabbinic theology. While most of his English writings have a universal quality and present a philosophy of religion applicable to all faiths, *Heavenly Torah* is Heschel's explanation of the heart of Judaism.<sup>7</sup>

This essay can only scratch the surface of the book's content. It covers the following five topics: Judaism as *aggadab*; the bi-polar nature of rabbinic thought; the differences between revelation and heavenly Torah; Heschel's own deflection of biblical criticism by downplaying the role of the text; and the role of prophecy in the ongoing community. I consider the importance of the book for engaging in further theological work, but I cannot analyze here Heschel's views on God, *mizvot*, prayer, ethics, and symbolism, or consider the intersection of his life and thought.

Tucked away at the end of *Heavenly Torah* is a passage in which Heschel offers a direct answer to all questions of revelation, prophecy, and biblical criticism. He suggests that:

You cannot grasp the matter of the "Torah from Heaven" unless you feel the heaven in the Torah. All temporal questions are in the context of eternity...But whoever denies the wondrous has no share in this world; how much more so can such a person

have no dealing with heavenly matters. If this event is like an everyday occurrence, given to accurate apprehension and description, then it is no prophecy. And if the prophetic encounter is sublime and awesome, without parallel in the world, then it is clear that no description will do it justice, and silence becomes it." (668)

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*One needs to experience a feeling of the Torah from heaven.*

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Heschel argues that one needs to experience a feeling of the Torah from heaven: if one does not, one should not be teaching or studying these matters. He declares passionately that Judaism is not the rational non-experiential approach of historians and talmudists. He remains the poetic Heschel—self-identified with God, striving to open his reader to the awe and wonder of the ineffable in an age of indifference. He writes of the Torah that "no description will do it justice" since it is a mystical entity beyond all proposition, an ineffable experience.

Heschel fits nicely with those early twentieth century thinkers who fostered the great age of modern theological mysticism: William James, Dean W. R. Inge, Evelyn Underhill, and Friedrich Heiler. For them, all religion is experience and the depth of the heart.<sup>8</sup> These thinkers dismiss philology, history, or metaphysical schemes to reach the non-doctrinal core of religion. Heschel similarly seeks "depth theology": "The theme of theology," he wrote, "is the content of believing. The theme of depth theology is the act of believing." "Theology," he elaborated, "is in books; depth theology is in hearts. The former is

<sup>7</sup> It is unfortunate that Heschel's book lacks an index of cited rabbinic passages to allow for cross-references. Also for a book that openly reads rabbinic thought through the eyes of later generations, there is no index of the myriad passages of Maimonides, Zohar, Maharal, and Hasidism from which Heschel drew his interpretations. Both are serious omissions. In addition, the footnotes are not consistent in citation of editions, or quotes.

<sup>8</sup> For example, "Moreover, when he introduces concepts drawn from medieval Christianity or from Eastern religions, he does not situate them in their communal, interpretative setting. Similarly, he does not present the basic concerns of the neo-scholastic authors whose views he tries to assess." Rowan Williams, "The Prophetic and the Mystical: Heiler Revisited," *New Blackfriars* 64 (1983): 330-347, esp. 333-334. Similar comments are found in Dana Greene, *Evelyn Underhill: Artist of the Infinite Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> On the difficulty of working philosophically with Heschel, see Neil Gillman, "Epistemological Tensions in Heschel's Thought" *Conservative Judaism* 50,2-3 (1998): 67-76; Edward Kaplan, "Heschel as Philosopher: Phenomenology and the Rhetoric of Revelation," *Modern Judaism* 21, 1 (Feb. 2001): 1-14.

doctrine, the latter is events.”<sup>9</sup>

Given the experiential call of Heschel’s reading of the Torah, one might be prompted to ask these questions: Can Heschel’s expectation for everyone to share in revelatory experience actually create an experiential Judaism? Can one listen to the direct voice of God as a voice of pietistic or poetic individualism, religious anarchy, or artistic creativity? Heschel’s theological position is certainly not for everyone, particularly those who are comfortable with rational, authoritarian, and legalistic approaches.<sup>10</sup> It is well suited to religious seekers who are on individual paths to directly experience God, yet it continues to pose the question of whether a romantic mystical sensibility can answer theological questions. We will return to these questions throughout this essay.

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*There is no binding halakhah without  
aggadah*

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### **Aggadic Man: Wonder**

Heschel’s primary aim in *Heavenly Torah* is to present the centrality of *aggadah*, which he defines as seeking religious experience, within Judaism. For Heschel, *aggadah* shows our very humanity and individuality, unlike the constricting and binding *halakhah*, which is followed in submission. He proclaims that

In *Halakhah* you find power and might, while in *aggadah* there is grace and love... *Halakhah* is the line of defense for the person whose wisdom exceeds his or her works; *Aggadab* lifts one up above all works....*Halakhah* deals with matters that are quantifiable; *aggadah* speaks of matters of conscience. (2)

Inspired by Rav Kook, H. N. Bialik wrote that

we need both *halakhah* and *aggadah*; *halakhah* is the fruit, but *aggadah* is the flower. Heschel, however, goes further and considers the *aggadah* as the fruit with firmly planted roots (7). *Aggadab* is not just ornamentation; it is as substantial and serious as the *halakhah*, serving as a record of the past experiences that guide us to our own calling. There is no binding *halakhah* without *aggadah*, since the latter can change the performance of a *mitsvah*.

Heschel credits Baruch Spinoza with the view “that Judaism is not a religion but a legal system” (5), and paradoxically considers pan-halakhic Orthodoxy to be Spinoza’s heirs. For Heschel, accepting only the *halakhah* is a non-normative position, for the *aggadah* is the source for the fear of heaven, spirit of the law, moral imperatives, and piety. *Halakhah* includes the realms of saving a life, engendering community values, and accepting human dignity—all tenets that spring from logical and legal thinking. In contrast, *Aggadab*’s piety offers poetry that is impressionistic, spiritual, and that flows from one’s relationship with God. Heschel maintains that:

The master of *Halakhah* ...determines how Israel should behave, and it is he who determines their public and private lives. The master of *Aggadab*...is only the realm of thought and speculation—matters of the heart that are invisible. (11.)

In Heschel’s view, *haggadah* is a major category including meta-*halakhah*, ethics, intention in prayer, performance of *mitsvot*, and human needs. Judaism, he argues, includes not only action but also the heart, beliefs, feelings, and thought. The contrast between the realms is bold: one is closed and the other is open. “Whoever says, ‘This *halakhah* does not seem right,’ forfeits his share in the world to come” (1). In contrast, Heschel suggests that “in *aggadah*, a person can easily reveal non-normative (*shelo ka-halakhah*) views”(2).

Heschel critiques those, such as Saul Lieberman,

<sup>10</sup> Heschel’s work is also similar to the important Catholic systematic theologian Karl Rahner in his work modernizing mysticism. (Interestingly, Rahner’s New York students often sought out personal relationships with Heschel.) In Heschel’s belief that every committed Jew becomes a hearer of revelation, one sees a similarity to Karl Rahner’s belief that every Christian is a mystic. Rahner wrote that our personalities have an innate capacity based on human freedom to reach the divine. Hearing the divine word in our freedom is our expression of the self. Karl Rahner, *Hearer of the Word* (New York: Continuum, 1994).

who proudly treated the rabbis of the Talmud as concerned only with legal details and minute philological textual traditions. For Heschel, someone taking this position is unfit to decide matters of Judaism, even *halakhab*. Heschel defends the direct experience of God over philological scholarship and legalism.<sup>11</sup> As his opponents were one-sided about the *halakhab*, Heschel was one-sided about the *aggadah*.

Gershom Scholem portrayed rabbinic Judaism and medieval philosophy as devoid of mysticism, crediting Kabbalah as the sole Jewish source. Heschel disagreed, arguing that mysticism is part of rabbinic Judaism, but that religious experience is its focus. (Rabbinic sages, in his view, are not simply halakhic figures, scribes or communal leaders.) Heschel assumes a continuous tradition of *aggadah* throughout all later generations: “From the time of Bahya ibn Paqudah until the time of Israel Baal Shem Tov,” he suggests, all great figures were focused on the *aggadah* and complained about the deviant legal scholars who ignored the *aggadah*, the heart of religious life and the core of all *mitsvot*. Heschel’s Judaism became the continuous tradition that includes *aggadah*, medieval Neo-Platonism, Ashkenazi esotericism, Maimonides, Kabbalah, Maharal, and Hasidism.

Maimonides supplies one of Heschel’s proofs for the centrality of *aggadah* because Maimonides began his *Mishneh Torah*, with *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* (Laws of the Fundamental Principles of the Torah), an aggadic composition. In Heschel’s understanding of Maimonides, *ma’aseh merkavah* (lit., “the account of the chariot,” referring to Ezekiel’s vision; Maimonides associated it with metaphysics) is equated with spirituality and not philosophy, for it deals with principles of religious faith. Furthermore, in the *Guide of the Perplexed* (III:51), Maimonides

wrote explicitly that the only way to enter the king’s inner courtyard (and approach God) is through knowledge of God, and *Heavenly Torah* 10, 17-20 is based on this passage in the *Guide*. Halakhic scholars do not know God and serve God in a lower form than those who have knowledge of God. This presentation of Maimonides derives from Heschel’s teacher Julius Guttman, who cast Maimonides as a neo-Platonist, as did Guttman’s contemporary Zevi Diesendruck. Additionally—and more than germane to our discussion—Heschel wrote his classic interpretive biography of Maimonides in the years immediately after he wrote his Yiddish poems. This influential work presents Maimonides as an engaged, caring, and contemplative religious figure—not a cold rationalist, as he was depicted by the neo-Kantianism of Hermann Cohen or the Aristotelianism of Harry Wolfson.<sup>12</sup>

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*Scholars did their utmost to present the Talmud as rational; Heschel restores the experiential, theosophic and irrational.*

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Beyond laying the groundwork for exploring Maimonidean thought, Heschel argued that creating a new *aggadah* for our age is done by presenting what was stated in the past, evaluating the various positions, and finally asking how they resonate with today’s aggadic needs. The first part of the volume illustrates the questions that Heschel considered important: Is Torah composed of ordinary words or esoteric secrets? What are the roles of miracles, Temple service and sacrifice? What was revealed in Torah? How is Torah a product of revelation? What are the reasons for the commandments, God’s indwelling, and theodicy? I will limit my comments to revelation.

Heschel’s unique and most important contribution to the study of *aggadah* was to reintroduce people to the rabbinic texts in their full strangeness,

<sup>11</sup> There are converse statements from R. Soloveitchik stating that we only accept *aggadah* from those scholars who were masters of *halakhab* like R. Akiva.

<sup>12</sup> Abraham Heschel, *Maimonides: Eine Biographie* (Berlin: E. Reiss, 1935). For his proximal influence, see Z. Diesendruck, *Maimonides' Lehre von der Prophecie, Jewish Studies in Memory of Israel Abrahams* (1927). For his own theories, “Did Maimonides Believe He Had Merited Prophecy?” (Hebrew) *Louis Ginzberg Jubilee Volume* (New York: American Academy of Jewish Research, 1945) 159-88.

<sup>13</sup> For a similar approach in the academic study of history, see Caroline Walker Bynum, “Wonder,” *American Historical Review*,

otherness, and wondrousness.<sup>13</sup> In the translator's introduction to *Heavenly Torah*, Gordon Tucker points out that although the book was not assigned to him during his own education, it was eye opening because it captured the sense of familiar, but unarticulated, "far flung exegesis" that is the basis of rabbinic Judaism (xxi). Heschel retrieves the wondrousness of the rabbinic text. Whereas most scholars of rabbinic literature did their utmost to present the Talmud as rational, ethical, and devoid of mysticism, Heschel restores the experiential, theosophic, and irrational.<sup>14</sup> Most modern Jews first learned of the wondrous and magical Torah vision of black fire on white fire described in *Midrash Konan*, Nahmanides, Hizquni, and Cordovero from the Hebrew edition of the book. Heschel does not demythologize, nor avoid the wondrous by way of abstraction or didacticism.<sup>15</sup> The strangeness does not bother him. On the contrary, he finds that these texts hold the secrets of rabbinic thought. Though acknowledging the critiques of the *aggadah* that point to the strangeness of some *aggadot*, Heschel does not try to defend the *aggadot* by showing that they are not strange or reinterpret them in modern terms. Rather, he points out comparable fantastic moments in *halakhot*, such as the strange *halakhot* of elephants eating and excreting children, and he notes that these moments are accepted as part of the rational halakhic world (21ff).

Heschel was not historical in his presentation and therefore he is hard to read as an introduction to *midrash* given much of the recent scholarship.<sup>16</sup> He does not grapple with the textuality of the rabbinic passages to

discover their worldview, myth, hermeneutics, intertextuality or actual positions. Nor does he use Greco-Roman history to determine the cultural world of the texts. Instead, he gives us a phenomenological sensibility: the experiential approach of rabbinic Judaism is *sui-generis* and wondrous.

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*R. Ishmael possesses delicacy, lucidity, and rationality; R. Akiva is a man of action who possesses inner profundity*

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## Two Opinions: Heaven and Earth

Heschel reworked R. David Zvi Hoffman's distinction between R. Akiva and R. Ishmael into a typology of two broad, intuitive, axiological, and personality-based approaches that typify Judaism throughout the ages.<sup>17</sup> He portrays R. Ishmael as possessing delicacy, intellectual reserve, clear thinking, sobriety, lucidity, and rationality. R. Akiva is described as being wondrous, a man of action intent upon reaching the people, as well as possessing inner depths, profundity, and a desire to ascend to the upper realms. This dichotomy reflects the thoughts of these two figures in the realms of spirituality, theodicy, daily life, and religious experience.

R. Ishmael offers interpretations based on tradition and the hermeneutic principles and has a rational ethics. He seeks to fulfill the middle path of "the right and the good." In contrast, Rabbi Akiva has an expansive approach that encompasses infinites of meaning and kabbalistic theosophy. He finds the unmeasured extremes of both leniency and stringency in the law (56-61). R. Ishmael advocates plain sense, humanistic reduction, and metaphor;

102, 1 (Feb., 1997): 1-17. She objects to the presentation of medieval history in a manner elevating contemporary concerns and modern rationality over the wondrous differences from today.

<sup>14</sup> E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951) accomplished this for the study of classical antiquity.

<sup>15</sup> Compare the books written under the direction of Isadore Twersky, for whom the virtue was to show that medieval scholars could allegorize or downplay the *aggadot* to provide a rational world.

<sup>16</sup> For examples (without any desire to slight by exclusion the many fine contemporary scholars of *midrash*), see Daniel Boyarin, Marc Bregman, Gerald Bruns, Michael Fishbane, Steven Fraade, Yonah Frankel, Moshe Halbertal, Joseph Heinemann, Marc Hirschman, Menachem Kahana, James Kugel, Joshua Levinson, David Stern, and Azzan Yadin.

<sup>17</sup> David Tzvi Hoffman, *The First Mishna and the Controversies of the Tannaim ; The Highest Court in the City of the Sanctuary* (New York: 1977). For the current state of the field, see Menachem Kahana, *Sifre Zuta on Deuteronomy: Citations from a New*

R. Akiva advocating the enjoyment of thematic, freely interpretive, mystical truth. Consider their divergent conceptions of God. R. Akiva's conception turned towards the personal God, the Holy One, blessed be He who "participated in the pain of his creature"; in contrast, R. Ishmael surrendered before a God of judgment, mercy, and power (32-34). Regarding the relationship of heaven and earth (a relationship at the core of Heschel's values), Heschel presents two chapters on the typological attitudes toward the *shekhinah* (God's presence). For R. Akiva, the *shekhinah* is located spatially, in the west, in the Temple, as in Ezekiel's vision. This approach, in turn, generated later *kavod* theories and Kabbalah. R. Ishmael senses God everywhere in the temporal world, as in Maimonidean cognition or Hasidism. One notices the similarity to Moshe Idel's categories of theosophic and ecstatic.

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*Heschel's book at its best when it presents both other-worldly asceticism and this-worldly pragmatism.*

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How do we explain Heschel's claims of rabbinic ecstasy and theosophy in modern terms? Throughout the book, Heschel casts R. Akiva as his mystical starting point, probably based on his own Hasidic background. He thus makes much of the book his own *bildungsroman*, in which he grapples with R. Ishmael as a defender of poetic experience, rational cognition, and confronting the needs of the hour. Many think that Heschel always favors one side or the other; in fact, in each chapter he seems to seek an approach that works today. In one chapter, he favors R.

Ishmael's defense of sacred time, but in the next chapter he leans toward R. Akiva, who identifies God and Israel as one.<sup>18</sup> Though the two men and two schools of thought seem at odds with each other, Heschel ultimately affirms both.

Heschel's view that we live between heaven and earth prompts us to ask whether normal life exists in Judaism. R. Akiva accepts mortification and living for the other world, suggesting a negative answer. For R. Ishmael, the answer is certainly yes, because "you shall live by them." Most modern rabbis would choose R. Ishmael and deny the relevance of R. Akiva; or, at the very least, would relegate this debate to the past. Here we see Heschel's book at its best when it presents both sides of the rabbinic position—both other-worldly asceticism and this-worldly pragmatism. For Heschel, to understand the intellectual movements of recent times, you must inquire into the chain of tradition that precedes them.

Heschel presents a rabbinic tension between transcendence and immanence (Chapter 14). The transcendental includes anything esoteric or mystical; it encompasses philosopher and kabbalist alike (who appear on opposite sides in Chapter 13) and anyone who speaks of higher realms, or hidden knowledge. Immanence includes the exoteric, this-worldly, terrestrial, or merely symbolic.<sup>19</sup> For Heschel, the transcendental approach treats Torah as an exact copy of a divine prototype. In the earthly approach, God gave the Torah to humans through Moses.

Another important category of rabbinic thought is "man in the image of God," which mediates between heaven and earth. According to R. Akiva, "The person is a reflection of the supernal realm...The human image below corresponds to the divine image above; terrestrial man resembles heavenly man." Meanwhile for R. Ishmael who

*Tannaitic Midrash*. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2002); Azzan Yadin, *Scripture as Logos: Rabbi Ishmael and the Origins of Midrash*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). When Heschel's book was first printed it received reviews that criticized the specifics of his dichotomy of Rabbis Akiva and Ishmael in given texts. For example, see David Shapiro, "New View on the Opinions of R. Ishmael and R. Akiva" (Hebrew) *Orachim* (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1977), pp. 241-260 who in his review called Heschel a "faithful architect of a grand building," but that some of the rooms still needed fixing.

<sup>18</sup> To use Idel's terms, Heschel offers a cross between "theurgy and ecstasy," in that Heschel accepts the ecstatic and the theurgic while rejecting the theosophic and the magical.

<sup>19</sup> *Heavenly Torah* 261, n. 5; the translators use the terms "immanence" and "transcendence" to correspond to Heschel's two approaches, not in their original philosophic meaning.

<sup>20</sup> Although the mythic nature of the image of God in rabbinic thought has only recently been emphasized in the work of

stresses the importance of earthly life, each person is unique and individual.<sup>20</sup>

Heschel's portrayal of R. Ishmael mixes Maimonidean naturalism, Hasidic panentheism, the poetry of Rilke, the anarchism of Tolstoy, with the need to respond to call of the moment. It does not include the rational immanence of the scientific, the pragmatic, and the functional. R. Akiva's portrait mixes Zohar, Nahmanides, Maharal, Karl Barth, and the comparative study of religion, but not halakhic process, synagogue life, or homiletics (*derash*). Heschel's categories do not all line up; his two poles are floating.

### Prophecy or Apocalypse

Heschel's most important poles of revelation are prophecy and apocalypticism—two unequal, if not opposite, concepts. Medieval Jewish thinkers define prophecy as a natural or preternatural ability to experience God. Revelation, on the other hand, is a modern question about the possibility of receiving God's word even though modern philosophy and science preclude the possibility. Medieval prophecy explains techniques of gaining divine knowledge, while the modern problem of revelation needs to justify how one can still speak of a non-empirical reality. Since modern thought has generally rejected revelation, Heschel answers the modern problem of revelation by triangulating medieval prophecy through his sensibility of directly experiencing a divine-human encounter.

For Heschel, prophecy describes a fundamental phenomenological orientation to the divine as a form of sympathy with God. In his view, the prophetic sensibility equals revelation, and revelation therefore has three options in the modern world: a return to a

medieval sensibility, a comparative religion category of paranormal consciousness, or a direct experience of a God-infused mystical and poetic life. (For a fourth option of reading Heschel as a modern existential presence, see the discussion of Neil Gillman below.) It is important to note that, in Heschel, the subtleties of the relations between the three options are not fully worked out. Heschel oscillates between R. Ishmael's rejection of metaphysics and R. Akiva's acceptance of a mystical heavenly Torah before returning to the experiential approach. Yet Heschel's wavering theological reflections on revelation and prophecy have not been superseded by any new theological reflection—despite many who take issue with his views. This suggests that contemporary Jews have avoided theological reflection for the attraction and safety of historicism.

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*Heschel's wavering reflections on revelation and prophecy have not been superseded.*

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Heschel's doctoral advisor Alfred Bertholet (1868-1951) and his student Johannes Lindblom distinguished between three experiences: ecstasy, ethical prophecy of concentration, and the apocalyptic. The first was the common ancient Eastern type of *unio mystica*, quite alien to Israel. Here the mystic is absorbed into a union with the deity. For this school of the history of religions, the ecstatic element in classical prophecy, if it exists at all, is confined to the prophets' profound concentration. By contrast, in ethical prophesy one encounters God through ethical petition and demands.<sup>21</sup>

Heschel writes that there are two realms: the prophetic and the apocalyptic. He notes that "the theology of R. Akiva has two basic apocalyptic concepts: the ascent of Moses to heaven and the existence of the Torah in heaven in the form of a

Moshe Idel, Yehudah Liebes, and Yair Lorberbaum, Heschel took these dichotomies as a given decades ago. Yehudah Liebes, "Myth and Orthodoxy: a reply to Shalom Rosenberg" *Jewish Studies* 38 (1998) 181-185 Yair Lorberbaum, *Imago Dei in Classical Judaism – Law and Philosophy* (forthcoming 2007), Lorberbaum gives full citations to Idel.

<sup>21</sup> See the acknowledgements in the preface to Abraham Heschel, *Die Prophetie* (Krakow, Nakladem Polskiej Akademji Umiejtności, 1936); Alfred Bertholet, *A History of Hebrew Civilization* 1926, reprinted Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1994). While this review treats Heschel's categories as those of phenomenology of religion, Jon Levenson criticizes Heschel's influence from the categories of Protestant theology. Jon D. Levenson, "The Contradictions of A.J. Heschel" *Commentary* 106,1 (Jan. 1998): 34-38.

book” (286). Apocalypticism is needed because “the cessation of prophecy was not easily accepted by the people of Israel” (id.). Although apocalyptic books were not found explicitly in rabbinic literature (the books were to be hidden), their influence affected many sages throughout Jewish history.

At points Heschel blurs the categories of the ecstatic and the apocalyptic and considers R. Akiva thirsting to become one with God. Heschel presents R. Akiva as the apocalyptic who believed Moses ascended like Enoch and that others have also experienced ascents of the soul (Chapter 18). Heschel contrasts this with R. Ishmael’s idea that Moses received a message:

The prophets dwell not upon what goes on in heaven, but what happens on earth (287).... The prophets hear words from the Almighty and learn what is on the mind of the Holy and Blessed One at that moment. The visionaries of the Apocalypse see words in heaven; they read what is written and engraved, since earliest times, in the books and on the tablets that are in heaven. The prophets speak of what they heard; the apocalyptic visionaries tell us what they read. (293)

Heschel’s distinction between apocalyptic and

prophecy corresponds to the debate concerning the event on Mount Sinai: Kabbalists think that Moses physically ascended, while Maimonideans think “ascent” means to ascend intellectually (352).

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*Heschel used R. Akiva to show infinities of Torah, freeing the reader from literalism*

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Heschel applies these two models also to God descending on earth—an apocalyptic vision of the *kavod* or an experiential intellectual grasping. We must choose either the apocalypticism of the *Zohar* or the prophetic approach of Maimonides. (The approaches of Judah Halevi, Albo, and Maharal disappear.<sup>22</sup>) Heschel used R. Akiva to show infinities of Torah, thereby freeing the reader from literalism, whereupon he can return to R. Ishmael and cognition. Heschel’s framing of R. Akiva as *Zohar* seems to be close to the position of the *Zohar* itself, especially in its unwavering acceptance of the existence of a heavenly Torah, sublime and above the world.<sup>23</sup> Heschel presents R. Ishmael as a Neo-Platonist Maimonidean, with a cognitive approach toward the grasping of hidden truths<sup>24</sup> through angels, *sefirot*, or intellectual apprehension. Prophecy does not directly come from God. It occurs, rather, through cosmic hierarchies both ancient and neo-Platonic or kabbalistic, mediated by natural and human elements (Chapter 28).<sup>25</sup> Yet many claim that Heschel equates prophecy with an American humanistic existentialism of encounter

<sup>22</sup> They are not midpoints but different starting points. Judah Halevi started with reliable tradition and peoplehood, Albo started with the text, and Maharal had a need for revelation that transcends the natural order and natural ethics.

<sup>23</sup> As the *Zohar* explains, “All the words of Torah are sublime words...all those words and all those stories—they are the garments.” Heschel even accepts the apocalyptic visions of light and heavenly books delineated in the *Zohar* and how, as it narrates, “all of Israel saw the letters flying through space in every direction, engraving themselves on the tablets of stone.” (However, it is important to note that Heschel is generally non-erotic in his approach to Kabbalah.); Daniel Chanan Matt, *Zohar, the Book of Enlightenment* (Paulist Press: New York, 1983), pp. 43-45, 120.

<sup>24</sup> Modern Orthodoxy and Centrism generally do use the Neo-Platonic elements of Maimonides and assume that Maimonides sought secular studies and not preparatory studies leading to prophecy.

<sup>25</sup> In his focus on cognition, Heschel does not have the important Farabi political elements of Maimonidean prophecy: Moses the lawgiver and the building of a virtuous society. His Maimonides is almost Abulafian; the medieval concept of intellect (*aqil*) meets Hasidism. In his discussion of the concept of intuition (*lutf*) in Sa’adyah, Heschel was able to deflect those who wanted to make Sa’adyah a rationalist, yet he stumbled with modern concepts of experience unable to define the specifics of medieval Kalam intuition; Heschel, A. J. “The Quest for Certainty in Saadia’s Philosophy,” *JQR* 33 (1942-3): 213-64.

<sup>26</sup> Many have also mistakenly conflated Franz Rosenzweig with Heschel. It is important to note that Rosenzweig specifically describes revelation as a sense of transcending the human finitude of death by entering into a stance of a loving relationship with the transcendent. This moment of transcendence moves existence from isolation to externalized relationships with other beings. This personal transcendent moment allows meaning to be created from personal human history, unlike Georg W. F. Hegel’s limiting of external life and history to the collective. God in his system is the existential commitment that transcends the entire Hegelian world of collective representation and the negations inherent in our

and response.<sup>26</sup>

### Torah from Heaven: Prototype and Will

The original second volume begins, “Two expressions are used in the Mishnah with respect to the Torah...Moses received *Torah from Sinai...* and *Torah from Heaven* (321). Heschel explains these two expressions as two separate models of revelation: “Torah from Sinai” and “Torah from Heaven,” associating the former with R. Ishmael and the latter with R. Akiva. R. Akiva’s “Torah from Heaven” means that the Torah did not begin at Sinai. Indeed it pre-existed Sinai as a primordial Torah. Hence an apocalyptic Kabbalah and an understanding of the divine will can yield a knowledge of this primordial pre-Sinai Torah, one perhaps more important than the Sinai Torah itself. The heavenly Torah antedates the world, yet it is ever expanding. Heschel situates the text’s other-worldly importance when he observes “R. Akiva believed that before the Sinaitic revelation, the Torah existed in heaven as a unitary document... the original Torah is even now in heaven” (264). Sinai fades away in importance because the heavenly Torah takes precedence over the earthly Sinai Torah. As Heschel argues:

The notion of a Torah literally existing in heaven may seem at first like a strange growth, the chaff and straw of our religious imagination. But on reflection it is simply a particular consequence of a whole systematic way of looking at the relationship of the supernal and terrestrial realms... The supernal realm contains the secret and origin of everything terrestrial. (265)

Even as he acknowledges that a heavenly Torah seems non-rational and a figment of the imagination, Heschel asserts the basis of Torah is the existence of a supernal archetypal Torah

greater than any earthly Torah.

After a strong defense of this position, Heschel turns around and makes “Torah from Heaven” problematic by asking this question. “Does “Torah from Heaven” mean that the letters were in a supernal realm or heaven, or is it just a way of referring to the divine will?” If the latter, and Torah is not actually in heaven in a physical way, then the divine will is available to all who listen. He explains that the primordial Torah is not something theosophic or esoteric, and does it give a fixed moral order for the universe. Heschel reveals his own experiential position of granting access to the primordial Torah in our own hearts, and chooses this as the title for the entire book. The philosophy of R. Akiva has become a sensibility of the heart.

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*The philosophy of R. Akiva has become a sensibility of the heart.*

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In one of the most memorable and innovative parts of the book, Heschel presents rabbinic texts that depict the Torah having visual elements.<sup>27</sup> A visual Torah further destabilizes any notion of a fixed textual Torah. R. Akiva’s visionary Torah is continued in the Middle Ages: Sa`adyah and Ibn Ezra accepted a pre-existing *logos*, and Maimonides considered the divine glory as an apprehension of the divine. Moreover, early esoteric traditions as preserved in *Midrash Konan*; Nahmanides and Hizquni, saw the primordial Torah as black fire on white fire (336-7).<sup>28</sup> By presenting the medieval positions (unavailable until the recent research of Idel), Heschel makes the modern questions fade away. If one conceives of the Torah as a heavenly fire and our earthly Torah as a pale reflection, then all questions—of authorship, history, canon, and content—vanish before the bright light of this supernal radiance.

Nahmanides was one of the prime sources for a

individuality. Compare the entire second book of the *Star of Redemption* on revelation. For a basic presentation, see Stéphane Mosès, *System and Revelation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig*, trans. Catherine Tihanyi (1982; Wayne State UP, 1992).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Daniel Boyarin, “The Eye in the Torah: Ocular Desire in Midrashic Hermeneutic,” *Critical Inquiry* 16 (1990): 532-50; Marc Bregman, “Aqedah: Midrash as Visualization” *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 2,1 (2003).

<sup>28</sup> Albo mentions but finds this approach of black fire on white fire lacking, based on the inability to have clear directives for reward and punishment.

Torah in heaven, completely unlike the current earthly Torah, composed of a single Name of God. Another source is the writing of R. Judah Loewe of Prague (“Maharal”; 1525-1609), for whose thought Heschel had a special affinity. Maharal developed the midrashic theme of the Torah as a blueprint for creation, and in his first comments on tractate *Avot*, he pointed out how Torah from heaven is above earthly definitions. When the Torah exists in this world, it is known in its limited meaning as part of the imperfect and human realm, where it no longer can reflect the primordial Torah because it is in an imperfect world. Maharal explained that the nature of the primordial heavenly Torah beyond the human ken contains contradictory opinions as a coincidence of opposites. When the heavenly Torah descends to the human realm, the Torah must adapt a single opinion and is no longer the bearer of the coincidence of opposites.<sup>29</sup> One can notice the basic similarities between Maharal’s and Heschel’s approaches, particularly considering the earthly text as pale before a heavenly Torah of divine will.

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*Torah is from heaven, but its nature is open.*

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One might be impelled to ask whether Heschel actually believes in a pre-existing heavenly Torah of black fire on white fire. It appears that he does, but he also seems to be winking at the reader.<sup>30</sup> In doing so, Heschel offers a Kabbalistic image sufficient for a neo-

orthodox Barthian but, rather than saying we need to submit in humility before revelation, he claims that a poetic spirit moves us. Torah is from heaven, but its nature is open.<sup>31</sup>

### **Torah from Sinai: Doctrine or Revelation in Ordinaire**

Heschel defines R. Ishmael’s “Torah from Sinai” as the giving of a specific earthly doctrine at a specific time and as a fixed text. Heschel is clearly less satisfied with the option of a fixed text, and he demonstrates its problematic nature through a series of questions: Does the “Torah from Sinai” include all of the Torah, even the parts given in the Tabernacle and the Steppes of Moab? If so, was the Oral Law also included? Heschel answers by suggesting that if the details of the Torah were given at the Tabernacle and if the Oral Law were not included, one would need only a minimal acceptance of the Sinai position. Heschel manages to whittle Sinai down to a specific revelation, one among many. R. Ishmael’s argument becomes simply ascertaining God’s will. Since Heschel formulates Torah as far from any fixed book or canon, he can ask, “What is Torah’s substance?” (322). He acknowledges, “Our sages who were involved in it day and night found it difficult to grasp its essence.”

Continuing this inquiry, Heschel limits revelation to the acceptance of divine will because all details cannot be pinned down:

Perhaps “the Torah” means the book we have today, while “Torah” in general refers

<sup>29</sup> On continuous revelation, Maharal has much to say relevant to contextualizing Heschel’s thought. On the question of why it says Torah from heaven and not from God, Maharal writes, “because the God of all flows wisdom to all everyday... If the Torah was not received by Moses on Sinai then it would have been received by another.” (*Derekh Hayyim* on *Avot* 1:1; see also *Ti’feret Yisra’el*, chs. 60, 69.)

<sup>30</sup> At points, he seems to have been influenced by Henry Corbin, the great scholar of Islamic mysticism and the translator of Heschel’s German work on prophecy into French. Corbin was attracted by their shared interest in using Max Scheler’s concept of sympathy as a modern appropriation of prophecy. When Heschel mentioned in the aforementioned quote that the “supernal realm contains the secret and origin of everything terrestrial,” it could be expressed in Corbin’s entrance into a realm of eternal essences. Corbin postulates an objective realm of the heart and imagination where such visions take place.

<sup>31</sup> Heschel is orthodox and supernatural in the way of Bishop Joseph Butler (1692-1752) who, by affirming revelation, rejected the Deism of David Hume and Thomas Hobbes. Heschel’s affirmation is also similar to that of R. Samuel David Luzzatto (1800-1865), who propounded a self-defined non-traditionalist orthodoxy that rejected liberal critiques of revelation. But whereas these latter thinkers, with a patent apologetic and rationalist thrust, decided clearly which medieval positions were still tenable in the modern era, Heschel deflected the issue by presenting his medieval positions through a personal poetic sensibility or as a phenomenology of experience.

to prophecy, or the revelation at Sinai, and it is a denial of the latter for which one forfeits eternity. However, one cannot establish fixed rules about the use of the definitive article by the Rabbis in relation to the word Torah (373).

In other words, Heschel asks whether revelation is a book, a prophecy, or Sinai. Curiously, since we cannot pin down the definite article, there is no delimitative meaning.

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*The tradition is a continuous plurality of positions—ever open, ever individualized.*

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In this absence of definitive statement, the reader is left to conclude only that Heschel would accept wide latitude in the interpretations of revelation, as long as it is affirmed that the Bible is God's will or a product of a divine human encounter. Heschel does not use his aforementioned detailed presentations of Maimonides, Nahmanides, Zohar, and Maharal to pin down his definition or to create parameters. He suggests, for example, that due to the multiplicity of ways to explain rabbinic texts, all interpretations are valid. Moreover, at certain places Heschel seems to affirm creative openness and at other places wants a sense of the wondrous transcending our finite categories. Heschel quotes R. Akiva on a heavenly text of Torah, then oscillates to R. Ishmael's rationalism of a complete earthly text, and finally uses R. Akiva's position to reject R. Ishmael's doctrinal concern with textuality. He finds problems with both positions. Hence, we are left free to have a more open approach to canon. The tradition is a continuous plurality of positions—ever open, ever individualized.

As part of his analysis of R. Ishmael, Heschel cites *Sanhedrin* 99a, the talmudic discussion that defines as heretics those who deny Torah is from Heaven. By now the reader should know that any fixed list or doctrine would bother

Heschel. Heschel notes that the Talmud on that page contains three *beraitot*. The first defines Torah as instruction and limits the status of heretic to one who denies instruction from heaven, allowing a broad concept of revelation. The second *beraita*, from R. Akiva, requires accepting the text "with all distinctions, deductions, or analogy." The third *beraita*, of R. Ishmael, calls the denial of revelation a form of idolatry, teaching that the revelation of Torah is intrinsically connected to the correct belief in God. Heschel obviously prefers the opinions of the first and third *beraitot*. He adds that there are many other statements in the *Sifre* and *Sifre Zuta* on the topic, but does not work out their implications.

Addressing the troublesome second opinion, Heschel points out that Maimonides' formulation of the Torah from heaven as including every word in fact originates with Hillel. But Heschel surprises his reader, claiming that because this position is perfectionism the people cannot accept it. Heschel feels compelled to give them other options and cites Abbaye's belief that not everyone is righteous and it is better to sin out of ignorance than malice. Heschel gives a "go and see" (*puq hazi*) of belief. This thinking is neither halakhic nor theological; he recognizes it is not an intellectual critique or response and in effect is saying, "let us not present texts that contradict the views people are led to by their doubts." The "go and see" works because he accepts the false dichotomy between the extremes of plenary verbal inspiration and heavenly divine will. Heschel's own interpretation of Maimonides' position of the *Guide* is absent from his presentation.

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*Whoever takes principles of the faith at face value distorts their true meaning.*

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Heschel seems reluctant to present theological points that the generation cannot handle, and he later justifies this by claiming that "whoever takes principles of the faith at face value distorts their true meaning... The entire history of Jewish thought contains a process of fusing together two extremes" (712). Unlike those writers who argue

that theological thinking has only one meaning, Heschel advocates an open-ended experience.

In the next chapter, Heschel suggests that some of the sages of the Talmud and Maimonides gave a plenary and verbal presentation of Torah as a polemic against sectarians. Heschel points out that, in the former case, the ancient Greeks thought that Moses made up the Torah, and, in the latter case, Maimonides stood against Moslems who denied the text of our Torah. These were not their actual beliefs, Heschel argues; these diverse writers, he claims, only stated them for polemical reasons (Chapter 21).

Heschel offers the reader four models of approaching the divine and human status of revelation. In each case he defines the nature of revelation by blurring the lines. Heschel treats revelation as if biblical prophecy were still alive and as if personal directives had the status of prophecy. (Heschel is unlike Eliezer Berkovits, who claimed that Torah is not in heaven in order to stress the human element.) Heschel argues that inner revelations have the same divine status as the revelations at Sinai.

In the first case Heschel conflates personal initiative and divine revelation (440). He explains that Moses ascended the mountain on his own authority and consequently there is a human element in Sinaitic revelation. For most theologians, a person's action in response to God is just that, a response, but Heschel takes response to God as revelation. Revelation thus becomes any action in response to God.

Heschel's second approach blurs the lines by showing that there were levels of revelation, some fallible. He argues that since prophecy was still alive in the time of the medieval sages and since the *beit din* possessed prophetic powers, it must still be found among ordinary people. Prophecy is not infallible since no one

considers medieval prophecy to be infallible.

Heschel's third approach quotes R. Zadok Ha-Kohen of Lublin to prove that there were three levels of revelation even in the time of Moses: (1) the Torah at Sinai, corresponding to Torah; (2) the repetition in the Tent of Meeting, similar to the prophets found in most of the rest of the first four books; (3) the steppes of Moab, where the Oral Law was given. These three levels correspond to Moses receiving through God's own mouth, the holy spirit (*ruah ha-qodesh*), and the start of the Oral Law at the steppes of Moab.<sup>32</sup>

Heschel's fourth approach conflates the issues of Sinai and today by equating Oral Law with revelation. Since the Oral Law is a continuation of Sinai, revelation is not a one-time event, Heschel reasons. In a chapter called "The Problems of the Maximalist Position," Heschel points to examples of defining Torah as including anything said in the future as part of revelation, and if the possibility of new insights in Torah is accepted, then not all is from God. Heschel thus treats interpretive creativity the same as revelation. Maimonides states that if there is debate (*mahloket*), then there is no tradition from Sinai. Heschel does not have any understanding of innovations within tradition; for him, if there are Torah innovations that we know human made, then Torah is a human creation.

Eastern Europe produced a variety of approaches of progressive revelation, infinite Torah, and Torah through mystic understanding. Heschel uses Hasidic homilies about hearing the voice of Sinai in daily life as if they are literal, and he uses Hasidic homilies claiming the ahistoric nature of Judaism to show that Sinai continues today. "Just as there is an Oral Torah, so is there a Torah seated in the soul... everyone adds to it, according to what heaven displays to them." (587) Heschel does not explain his relationship to Hasidic individuality. His later works on Hasidism, such as *Passion for Truth*, completed his thoughts on Hasidic individuality.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> *Heavenly Torah* 475-6; R. Zadok Hakohen, *Pri Zaddik behar* 93-4.

<sup>33</sup> Aryeh Cohen, in his review of *Heavenly Torah* in *Conservative Judaism* 58:1, (Fall 2005) speculates that Heschel's work on the typology of the Ba'al Shem Tov and Menahem Mendel of Kotzk might have been the follow up third volume, as would his articles on Maimonides and prophecy. This seems highly likely.

## No Text

Heschel avoids addressing Bible criticism by making the biblical text pale in importance. The heart and prophecy are what count. In accepting divine will as any form of communication with man, Heschel allows the question of Biblical criticism to fall away. Either the divine will antedates the biblical text or it is created in response to the moment. He follows this chain of reasoning:

The essence of our faith in the sanctity of the Bible is that its words contain that which God wants us to know and to fulfill. How these words were written down is not the fundamental problem. This is why the theme of Biblical criticism is not the theme of faith, just as the question of whether the lightning and thunder at Sinai were a natural phenomenon or not is irrelevant to our faith in revelation (258).

In many ways, Heschel has framed his argument so he cannot be pinned down. The Torah from heaven is not now in heaven. To the extent that the Torah was from heaven then, now we have a fallen human version. And if Torah was given at Sinai, we are still called by God now in the contemporary world.

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*When Bible critics treat the text as human,  
they rob it of the prophetic message.*

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I disagree with Heschel's consciously ambiguous treatment of any statement about revelation, yet the sources and issues he

presents raises are important. Heschel sees no relevance in the philological literal meaning (*peshat*), nor does he think that the meaning of the text through the generations is only human homiletics (*derash*).<sup>34</sup> He reawakens the divine call in the modern era; but when Bible critics treat the text as human, they rob it of the prophetic message. In the end, people who do not experience God in the heart cannot understand the message.

Though not a historian, Heschel was correct to note that the Bible's own statement leads to a doctrine that it was composed of earlier works. Even the Pentateuch cites earlier works, *sefer hayasbar* and *sefer milhamot A-donai*, and implies Moses may have written the Pentateuch slowly over many years.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Heschel shows that prior commentators accepted lower criticism. For example, Heschel cites the sources stating that Joshua added the last eight verses of the Torah. Yet he also cites Don Isaac Abarbanel for the premise that because God told Moses to write these verses about the future, it is as if God Himself wrote it. And yet, in addition to citing textual concerns Heschel gives a mystical explanation. He cites Hayyim Vital, arguing that "It is actually not so farfetched that Moses wrote [the last eight verses] in tears, for he saw that his aura was departing, so that he was like someone who was not there" (615). Despite Heschel's previously textual position, he is not winking at this point. Hayyim Vital's mysticism resonates with him.

We should thank Heschel for collecting much of this material and demonstrating *midrash*, medieval thinkers, and Hasidic texts trembled before the awesomeness of revelation while they had fluid concepts of the text. Beginning with "Introduction to Bible" classes offered by S. D. Luzzatto in the nineteenth century, there has been

<sup>34</sup>On Heschel's use of historical materials without any historicism or philological concern, see Jon D. Levenson, "Religious Affirmation and Historical Criticism in Heschel's Biblical Interpretation" *AJS Review* 25,1 (2000-2001): 25-44.

<sup>35</sup> On these topics, good starting points for developing a rabbinic perspective on the editing of the Bible are the following: Menahem Mendel Kasher, *Torah Shelemah* (Jerusalem: Machon Torah Shelemah) vol. 8 addenda ch. 17; Vol. 19, addenda 33; comments on Num 33:2; Sid Z. Leiman, "The Inverted Nuns at Numbers 10:35-36 and the Books of Eldad and Medad" *JBL* 93 (1974): p. 348-355; Baruch A. Levine, "Critical Note: More on the Inverted Nuns of Num 10:35" *JBL* 95 (1976):122-124; Yehudah Kil, *Bereshit*, in *Daat Mikra* series (Jerusalem: 2003 ) ; M. Breuer, *Pirquei Bereishit* (Alon Shevut, 1999).

<sup>36</sup> On Rashbam, see Elazar Touitou, "Concerning the Methodology of R. Samuel b. Me'ir in His Commentary on the Pentateuch," *Tarbiz* 48 (1979): 254-64 (Hebrew). According to Touitou, Rashbam distinguishes between the legal and narrative portions of the Torah: the legal portions are the word of God himself while the narrative portions (and all of

an approach to understanding the Torah that mines these classical commentaries for statements that would allow one to accept revelation and still use lower criticism. The statements of Rashbam<sup>36</sup>, Ibn Ezra, Ibn Caspi, Judah Ha-Hasid<sup>37</sup>, and Abravenel become the needles through which the huge camels of the philological and historical enterprises of the last two centuries are threaded in the quest for a historical reading (*peshat*). In contrast to this *peshat* tradition, Heschel does not use these sources for confinement to earthly text. He uses them instead to ask important theological questions about prophecy and God's word: How does the prophet use his own personality in the process of hearing God's word? Can the word transcend the text? How does the circle of prophets create something greater than the individual? Heschel collects enough material to start a discussion on the theologies of revelation.<sup>38</sup>

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*His question was how to awaken modern Jews  
to transcend the limited definitions of  
revelation.*

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In sharp contrast to Heschel's mystical and transcendentalist understanding of revelation and Torah, Louis Jacobs saw the text as a predominately human product, with human authorship, based on a specific historical era, confined to a faulty process, and having the primitive morality of its era. Jacobs's

theological question was, "Can moderns still accept revelation?" In contrast to Jacobs's watery reading of revelation, Heschel's goal was to show the incredible plurality of *aggadah*, in the broad sense; on revelation specifically, his question was how to awaken modern Jews to transcend the limited, dogmatic, and finite definitions of that revelation.<sup>39</sup>

It is important to note that Heschel's quest to seek the experience behind the text was not original to him, since he would have been familiar with the formulations and definitions of revelation in the field of history of religions, especially those used between 1890 and 1933, when he received his doctorate after writing his dissertation on prophecy. Heschel would have known Matthew Arnold's statement, seminal for the study of comparative religion, that "all literature is tentative and Biblical literature is no exception."<sup>40</sup> For Arnold, "to understand that the language of the Bible is fluid, passing, and literary, not rigid, fixed, and scientific, is the first step towards a right understanding of the Bible." In T.S. Eliot's explanation, Arnold sought to dodge the question of having to mediate between the naturalism of T.H. Huxley and the doctrinal position of John Henry Newman. Primarily a poet and literary critic himself, Arnold argued for a more poetic understanding of religious dogmas, scriptures, and the existence of God.<sup>41</sup>

Hans Kippenberg explained that in the first decades of the twentieth century, the study of religion was motivated by the quest to overcome the materialistic bourgeois exclusion of God from

Deuteronomy) were written by Moses. Heschel would allow for the start of the theological discussion of how God's will unfolds within the texts.

<sup>37</sup> Israel Ta-Shma "On Biblical Criticism in Medieval Ashkenaz," *Kenesset Mehkarim* I, pp. 273-282.

<sup>38</sup> Marc B. Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides' Thirteen Principles Reappraised* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004) is a historical analysis of the doctrinal position. However, for an excellent example of a theological analysis of the doctrinal position, see William J. Abraham, *The Divine Inspiration of Holy Scripture* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981). The theological meanings of many basic concepts in rabbinic and medieval texts have not been analyzed, including prophets using their own personal style (*signon*), the medieval understanding that the language of the Torah is based on human accommodation (*dibrah torah bi-leshon benai adam*) or the difference between holy spirit (*ruah ha-godesh*) and prophecy.

<sup>39</sup> For Louis Jacobs's views, see his *We Have Reason to Believe* (London, Vallentine, Mitchell & Co., 1957); *Principles of the Jewish Faith* (London, Vallentine, Mitchell & Co., 1964). The latter is his post controversy defense.

<sup>40</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Literature and Dogma* (1883) p. 31; preface. Heschel clearly followed this approach, especially in his extreme statement that the entire Bible is not biblical.

<sup>41</sup> Variants of this poetic approach are cited in works known by Heschel: Reville, E.B. Tylor, Soderblum, and van der Leeuw, see Hans G. Kippenberg, *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age*. trans. Barbara Harshav (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press. 2002) *passim*. Even R. S. R. Hirsch at many points avoids the text and states "Jews are the living parchment of the

modern life and seek a return to religious genius, by a sense of the numinous, an animistic *mana*, the sacred, the prophetic revelation, and the direct encounter—i.e. anything beyond contemporary materialism. During this time, even the contemporary Church religion was considered more materialistic and self-serving than a means to connect with the divine. Scholars of the period sought in the comparative method access to the importance of revelation and prophecy that were part of every religion, but have been lost to the bourgeois. And these scholars used a vast variety of Romantic theories connecting prophecy and genius to explain the phenomena,<sup>42</sup> sometimes combined with more recent theories of vitalism by James or Bergson. Heschel romantically identifies all experiences as prophetic: Bible, *Heikhalot*, Maimonides, veridical dreams, Hasidism, Existentialism, art, and music. Associating twentieth-century creativity with prophecy, Heschel writes that “Prophecy is the product of the poetic imagination. The flash of prophetic or poetic inspiration is a part of God's perpetual revelation.”<sup>43</sup>

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*Heschel seeks the highest religious experience centering on the ethical prophet.*

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By the 1920s and 1930s, after collecting data on oracles, meditation, and shamanism, these scholars considered the category of revelatory religion to be the exclusive domain of the Semites. The higher form of Semitic revelation was the ethical prophet of the Hebrews.<sup>44</sup> Heschel, therefore, does not seek just any religious experience, but the highest religious experience centering on the ethical prophet. He rejects descriptions of religious experience that lack an ethical component, such as Rudolph Otto's concept of the numinous or

Eliade's symbolic approach. For comparative religions scholars like Van de Leeuw, “all experience is revelatory”; the very experience needs to oppose the materialism of modern life. Heschel critiques Otto, considering the numinous revelatory experience itself to be ethical. It necessarily transforms culture as it moves life from materialism to God-centeredness.

### *Halakhab*

For Heschel, the halakhic process and the Oral Law from Moses become continuations of Sinai in a literal way, and are treated as a series of new revelations. Heschel considers anything not explicitly defined from Sinai as a change, not a process; therefore the various moments of the giving of the Torah—first the well of Marah, then Sinai, and finally the Tent of Meeting—are each separate revelations within the continuous revelations of the halakhic process. According to Heschel, there is only continuous cognition. In these rabbinical responses, there is no historical change or driving force to history, only God-intoxicated rabbis responding to their own times.

After the destruction of the Temple, prophecy was taken from prophets and given to the sages. Like many other twentieth-century Jewish thinkers, Heschel finds importance in the story of the oven of Akhnai, the talmudic debate that ends with a heavenly voice proclaiming that Torah is not in heaven. For Heschel, this text teaches the role of human initiative in performing of God's will. Heschel concludes that this text “crystallized the idea that the Torah flows from two sources: the wellsprings of prophecy and the wellsprings of human wisdom.”

Heschel actually defends the idea that the human initiative of the sage should be seen as God's guiding hand. As a result, he suggests that their personal opinions can transcend the text. While Heschel presents the sources for “*da`at Torah*”

Torah- not the text studied by scholars.”

<sup>42</sup> Albert Reville *Prolegomenes de l'histoire des religions* (1881, 4th ed., 1886; Eng. trans., 1884) and cited by Evelyn Underhill and others

<sup>43</sup> Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), Vol. II, 148; 146.

<sup>44</sup> Kippenberg, *Discovering Religious History*, pp 183-4. This list of those who defined the prophets as ethical included Nathan Soderblom and Van de Leeuw, both read by Heschel for his doctorate.

because he sees rabbinic authority as individual and expressionistic, he does not draw the political implications of this idea (Chapter 27). He entirely ignores the hierarchic, political, and coercive structures in his discussion of talmudic law or of *halakhab* as duty, as Gordon Tucker notes with respect to Heschel's selective use of David Zvi Hoffman.<sup>45</sup> Heschel's position functions as hyperbole against presentations of the Sages as rational and juridical, but at times he sounds like he is advocating the acceptance of the Haredi position of *da'at Torah*, which he is not.

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*Heschel lacks the elements of political authority, obedience and divine command.*

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As I stated earlier, Maharal exerted an important influence on Heschel, e.g., Heschel accepted Maharal's idea that rabbinic Torah is greater than the written Torah. Heschel further accepts that Torah intellect is greater than logic and sense data and that the sage is greater than the prophet (*hakham adif mi-navi*). Consequently, Torah is not located in texts but in rabbis (666). Yet because everyone is a rabbi-mystic, Heschel's understanding lacks the elements of political authority, obedience and divine command. Heschel identifies looking "at what the people do" (*puk hazzi*) as the basic first instinct of the halakhic process. He quotes R. Hai Gaon, claiming that consensus (*ijma*) is greater than logic of the text (*kiyas*)(662).<sup>46</sup>

Heschel surprisingly turns "see what people do" into a form of revelation by trusting the collective's connection to God.<sup>47</sup> There are few halakhic figures that share this premise: One has to go back to the *ge'onim* to find it. In many ways, Heschel should have said that the first premise of aggadic man is to decide a practical matter after he sees the situation.

Heschel correctly notes rational Maimonidean influence on Hatam Sofer's rejection of apocalyptic Kabbalah when the latter claimed that Moses and Elijah never ascended, only their souls did (335).<sup>48</sup> Heschel, however, misses the 1840s cultural polemics against Reform by treating Hatam Sofer as a model of rationalism. As a graduate of Berlin's *Hochschule* Reform seminary, Heschel certainly did not accept Hatam Sofer's banishment of the Reform movement, nor his ban on secular studies, western dress, and middle-class practices. Hatam Sofer was socially conservative, but Heschel has made him the liberal exemplar for a dynamic vision of Torah based on personal inspiration and attaining a heavenly Torah above the text. In contrast, in Heschel's hands R. Samson Rafael Hirsch's cultural integration becomes a reactionary fixing of the Torah into text, doctrine, and static revelation. The spontaneous, intuitional, *ex-cathedra* pronouncements of Hatam Sofer and Hasidism take precedent over the rational textuality of both neo-orthodoxy and positive historical Judaism.

On the principle of halakhic fluidity and multiple opinions (*elu ve elu*), Heschel returns once again to

<sup>45</sup> David Tzvi Hoffmann, *The Highest Court* (New York: 1977).

<sup>46</sup> On this responsum and its implications, see Tsvi Groner, *The Legal Methodology of Hai Gaon*, Brown Judaic Studies (Decatur, GA, 1985). Moses Zucker, "The Problem of Isma—Prophetic Immunity to Sin and Error in Islamic and Jewish Literatures" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 35 (1966): 149–73. It is interesting to note that Tucker adds a telling footnote stating that *ge'onim* could have been in agreement with Mordecai Kaplan in locating Judaism in practice, but then he reminds us the *ge'onim* were favoring the community not because of the historical process but because they believed that the divine will rested on the community, p. 662. For an opposing model in which there is a need to rely on logic (*kiyas*) based on Maimonides, and not the Geonic *ijma*, see Jose Faur, *Iyunim be-mishneh torah le-ha-Rambam* (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1978).

<sup>47</sup> Heschel's "go and see" should be compared to Robert Gordis's formulations; see Robert Gordis, *Judaism for the Modern Age* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1955). And see the questioning of this ignoring of precedent in order to "see what the people are doing" by his grandson Daniel H. Gordis. "Precedent, Rules and Ethics in Halakhic Jurisprudence," *Conservative Judaism* 46,1 (1993): 80-94.

<sup>48</sup> *Responsa Hatam Sofer* VI:98 Jacob Katz, "Towards a Biography of the Hatam Sofer" *From East and West* (1990) 223-266 paints a picture of R. Moshe Sofer as a stringent charismatic, while Moshe Samet in his recently published work points out a number of the lenient rulings of the Hatam Sofer and claims that his halakhic methodology is more complex than many have thought. *Hadash Asur Min Ha-Torah: Perqaim be-toledot ha-Orotodopsiyah* (Jerusalem, Merkaz Dinur 2005), pp. 306-309, 317-318.

*Hatam Sofer*, who taught that there is no certainty in *halakhab*, for “even a halakhic ruling that appears to us to be firm and correct may not be so according to ultimate truth” (706). For *Hatam Sofer*, the Torah is above any text; aggadic statements such as “no innovations in the Torah” (*hadash asur min batolah*) are valued over halakhic reasoning. Heschel uses this fluidity to prove the need to look toward the ultimately inaccessible divine Torah rather than knowing Torah only by means of juridical decisions.

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*The approach of a heavenly, supernatural non-textual Torah comes naturally to him.*

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Heschel claims that the approach of a heavenly, supernatural non-textual Torah comes naturally to him; R. Akiva was his “mother’s milk” (xxv). He understands the *halakhab* through Moshe Cordovero, Maharal, Rama of Fano, Hasidism, and *Hatam Sofer*.<sup>49</sup> He is a Galician *hasid* gone “bad,” with a tension between his personal past and his current modernist experience. In this juxtaposition of histories and beliefs, *Hatam Sofer* meets the modernists Rainer Maria Rilke, Max Scheler, and William James. Heschel’s pluralism is more experiential than liberal, more poetic than intellectual.

Heschel does write that that today’s *halakhab* needs to be more like the ideas of R. Ishmael in accepting *ad hoc* leniencies. He argues that “All paths should be presumed to carry danger” (718) and “one cannot be safe and observant, but one needs to light lamps for the multitude.” Heschel cites R. Simḥah Bunim on the need for intentional sin; he also cites cases of personal illumination and messianic intentions, and accepts the idea that there will be new messianic readings of the Torah in which the pig will be kosher. The very texts a halakhic thinker tells you to ignore, Heschel

makes pillars of his thought (Chapter 35). His readings are not those of New York, but rather more like those of the Polish schools of Kotzk, Izbica, and R. Zadok Ha-Kohen.

In presenting the rabbinic perspective, Heschel accepts the doctrines of R. Zadok ha-Kohen of Lublin (1823-1900) by name. R. Zadok accepts a fluid Torah of the heart over the Torah of the texts. Throughout *Heavenly Torah*, Heschel follows the thought of R. Zadok, where there is an identity of experience and prophecy that create different levels, as well as a blurred line between the human mind with God’s revelation. R. Zadok wrote, “The Sefer Torah written in ink on parchment is only for this world that hides and conceals the true light of the future age. As it is written, ‘on the tablet of their hearts I will write it.’”<sup>50</sup> Yet Heschel lives by this Torah of the heart, while the Hasidic mystic R. Zadok strongly cautions that the infinite Torah of the heart is not for this world. For R. Zadok, R. Meir typifies this Torah of the heart, which cannot exist in the world: “R. Meir...comprehended the inner light...No one could reach the limit of R. Meir's infinite knowledge.” In contrast, R. Akiva is the teacher for this world who uses the halakhic process. “All things in the physical world are limited; therefore the physical *halakhab* is forced to decide against R. Meir's infinite approach. [The infinite Torah] can only lead to quarreling because it is not subject to the give and take of the halakhic process.”<sup>51</sup>

Unlike R. Zadok, Heschel describes a direct reading of rabbinic texts, including *halakhab*, based on the immense openness of the *aggadah* as a system of polarities, tension, and oscillation. He never asks how to resolve indeterminacy or reach a legal decision. Heschel believes rabbinic texts are forever open and individualistic, and that the Talmud cited contradictory statements without seeking a resolution, as if *Tosafot*, Maimonides, and the *Shulḥan Arukh* had not already decided to accept only one of the statements.<sup>52</sup>

Heschel considers the approach of most halakhic sages who treat the *halakhab* as defining Judaism to be provincial. He claims that:

Most Sages have made the *Halakhab* primary and life secondary to it. As for one who says that a certain decree or another cannot be lived with, they coerce him until he says "I am willing." [They say] "The *halakhab* was not given to be marked up and evaluated. It is absolutely unique. All is contained in it, including its own foundations and boundaries. It is above critique...I object to the provinciality of thought, and to the construction of mind in all of this. (717-718.)

R. Soloveitchik and his followers would consider this concept to be simply wrong—even sacrilege.<sup>53</sup> Yet to an aggadic person, Heschel offers as a worldview the open-ended aspects of rabbinic thought.<sup>54</sup>

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*The Talmud should remain a mixture of justice, piety, custom and ethics.*

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The Talmud should remain a mixture of justice, piety, custom, convention, ethics, and exemplarity. One should not rarify one part, even the *halakhab*, and make it unique. Spirituality, human sensitivity, *kavvanah*, and *aggadah* are not supererogatory, but always in balance with *halakhab*. Rabbinic texts are to be read as experiential and containing a spirit of the law; insights from *aggadah*. Maharal or Hasidism can carry prescriptive weight, and Heschel points out that Maharal and R. Yeshayah Horowitz (*Shelah*) even advocated

*Halakhic Man*. Hartman views Torah from the perspective of our autonomous, pluralistic, modern selves and the ways we act based on our limited human choices. In contrast to this contemporary and active point of view, Heschel advocates a heavenly Torah known in the heart; for Hartman, in contrast, a connection between heaven and heart is not relevant; see *A Living Covenant* (New York: Free Press, 1985).

<sup>53</sup> On Heschel's critiques of Soloveitchik in his classroom as panhalakhic, see Samuel H. Dresner, "Heschel and Soloveitchik: The Vital Center," *Conservative Judaism* 43:4 (1991): 18-31. For Soloveitchik's critiques of Heschel, see Lawrence Kaplan, *Halakhab and Religious Experience in the Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (forthcoming book) ch. 1. From a similar canon R. Zvi Yehudah Cook creates a particularistic quest for prophecy in the Jewish soul, for the national collective of Israel, and in the land of Israel, and choosing the collective over the individual. These would be anathema to Heschel.

<sup>54</sup> For a similar open-ended approach to rabbinic texts that also relies on Hasidism, but combines the latter with Levinas and literary indeterminacy, see Marc Alain Ouakim, *The Burnt Book: Reading the Talmud*, trans. Llewellyn Brown. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1995).

<sup>55</sup> For details of his observance, see Yair Sheleg, "The Universal Rabbi," *Ha'aretz* (June 27, 2003); for his lack of clear directives, see Yehudah Mirsky, "The Rhapsodist," *New Republic* 4 (19/99). The translator and editor Gordon Tucker, compares Heschel's approach to *halakhab* to David Hartman. The latter bases his thinking on a this-worldly approach to *halakhab* as a democratic and creative process, derived from *Loneby Man of Faith* and

studying the wisdom of rejected rabbinic opinions. Heschel defers to the past by keeping all past options open. *Heavenly Torah* has a refreshing discussion of leniencies and stringencies, one that acknowledges that stringencies have always had the upper hand in Jewish history (753). In contrast to his contemporary Eliezer Berkovits and others who see greater strictness now, Heschel argues that we are more lenient in the modern era in America. He expects everyone to reach his or her own opinions with the seriousness of a talmudic sage.

In Heschel's understanding of *halakhab*, the human elements for our age, particularly marriage and sexuality, become God-intoxicated ethical projects. Even while eating and drinking, we have to worry about gluttony that might fall outside of the Torah's permission and understanding of human dignity. Heschel advocates Safed pietistic customs as a source for dealing with these everyday problems.

We should follow the lead of the famed sociologist-theologian Ernest Troeltsch (1865-1923) who, in his valuable analysis of the role of social structure in religion, would categorize Heschel as having a mystical, individualistic approach to religion unencumbered by generating control over his followers. Heschel's approach is neither church nor sect, but what we loosely call today "spirituality"—an approach to God located outside church structures and therefore capable of generating a wide range of interpretations. For Troeltsch, Heschel is not a member of a denomination. He is a sociological a mystic. Heschel's own behavior based his own callings of the moment is idiosyncratic and personal at best.<sup>55</sup>

## Anthology, Poetry, and Theology

*Heavenly Torah* belongs on the shelf with the other great romantic readings of rabbinic Judaism, especially Bialik's and Yehoshua Ravnitsky's *Book of Legends*, Louis Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews*, and Shai Agnon's *Present at Sinai*. Nevertheless, it is quite instructive to compare Agnon's content with Heschel's. Agnon's chapter titles reflect the revelation at Sinai, or the collective's lived experience of the Sinaitic experience: "In the third month" "we will do and we will hear" "thunder and lightning" "abstinence and bounds" and the "Ten Commandments."

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*Heschel's choice is to hear God; all the talk in the world won't help you understand the rabbis.*

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For Heschel, revelation is not just the event at Sinai: He does not even collect the rabbinic statements about Sinai. Instead, he provides analyses of divine-human encounters within rabbinical literature. Whereas Agnon presents the statements without embellishment, Heschel's rabbis, are too much like Rilke,<sup>56</sup> i.e., already self-conscious about the metaphorical nature of metaphysics.

Heschel presents *Zohar*, R. Zadok, Maharal, and *Shelah* as core texts of Judaism and wants to use them for modern theology. He teaches his readers about the depth and breath of

Jewish thought and about acceptable positions not taught in the academic Jewish study of his time. While there is a wealth of new sources in his book, Heschel does not leave them as historic curiosities but recoups them as part of the rabbinic palette that should be taken seriously—especially by those who are mystical, intuitive, or romantic, or even artistic, and anarchistic. In many ways Heschel has provided an annotated *Norton's Anthology of Revelatory Thought in Judaism*. Now is the time for those of us inclined to theology, both systematic and historic, to evaluate the material.

Heschel's tension between the transcendental and earthly is palpable. Can these applications hold true for us moderns? Heschel's choice is to hear God; all the talk in the world won't help you understand the rabbis. As Heschel already wrote in his poems of 1933, "Let it be clear: enthusiasm or mockery!" (193). One needs to take up the prophetic banner of renewal, the poetic, the kabbalistic or the Maimonidean, or one must openly reject Heschel's approach. Heschel demands a reading of his text in his own commitment to openness. He asks, however, the reader to not limit him for the demands of those who do not hear the voice of God. The "aggadic man" hears loudly the divine will from heaven. In our humanness we understand revelation in contemporary poetry, theology, and study of religion to produce a response in deeds.

<sup>56</sup> In comparing Rilke's poetry to Heschel, my student Mordechai Shinefield notes that for both where language cannot be used, we find the divine "leaps around" and "changes." He notes also the use of Rilke's "pure Too-little" before it transforms into "that empty Too-much." Similarly in Heschel, R. Akiva is too much while R. Ishmael is too little. Mordechai Shinefield, "Heschel and Rilke: Dichotomous Language and Poetics" (Unpublished undergraduate paper, Yeshiva College, spring 2006).