

Title: I Asked for Wonder: A SPIRITUAL ANTHOLOGY
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Notes:

Page viii – xi:

And I found myself recalling a hasidic teaching he often quoted. “There are three ascending levels of how one mourns: With tears—that is the the lowest. With silence—that is higher. And with song—that is the highest.”

I understood then what it was I had experienced: the lesson that how a man meets death is a sign of how he has met life. Intimations of melody countered my sadness. At that moment the power of the human spirit, mortal and frail though it is, never seemed so strong.

Ten days before his death Heschel had taped a television interview for NBC and was asked by the interviewer at the close of the program if he had a special message for young people. He nodded his head and seemed to turn to the future he would never see. “Remember,” he said, “that there is meaning beyond absurdity. Know that every deed counts, that every word is power....Above all, remember that you must build your life as if it were a work of art....”

The day before his death, Heschel insisted on traveling to Connecticut to stand outside a federal prison in the freezing snow, waiting for the release of a friend, a priest, who had been jailed for civil protest.

He died on the Sabbath eve, in his sleep, peacefully, with a “kiss,” as the ancient rabbis describe the death of those who die on that day. At his beside were two books: one a hasidic classic, the other a work on the war in Vietnam. The combination was symbolic. The two books represented two different worlds: eternal spirit and mundane present, mysticism and diplomacy, heaven and earth. Most choose one or the other. Heschel refused to ignore either, preferring to live in the tension of that polarity.

After the close of the Sabbath and before the funeral a strange gathering of friends collected in his home to comfort the family: there were several former students, a hasidic rabbi, an esteemed writer on the holocaust, a well-known Catholic priest, and his last disciple, the son of the founder of a Japanese Christian sect.

How to mourn? With tears, with silence, with a song?

Who was Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel?

Born in Warsaw, Poland, in 1907, a descendant of an illustrious line of hasidic rabbis, even from early childhood Heschel was viewed with great expectations. At the age of four or five scholars would place him on a table and interrogate him for the surprising and amusing answers he would give.

When his father died during his ninth year, there were those who wanted the young boy to succeed him almost at once. He had already mastered many of the classical religious texts; he had begun to write; and the words he spoke were a strange combination of maturity and youth. The sheer joy he felt as a child, so uncontrollable at times that he would burst out in laughter when he met a good friend in the street, was later tamed into an easy sense of humor that added to his special personal charm. But there was also astounding knowledge, keen understanding, and profound feeling: an awareness that man dwells on the tangent of the infinite, within the holy dimension; that the life of man is part of the life of God. Some hasidic teachers felt in him a renewal of their movement, which had grown dormant

in the twentieth century, might come about. Others too were aware of the new light that was glowing in their midst. It can be said with certainty that the years in Warsaw provided nourishment of the spirit and intellect, that inner dignity of who he was, which gave permanent direction to Heschel's being. It could not, however, prevent him from peering beyond and, in the end, setting out from his home to explore the world of Western civilization which thundered and glittered about him. Departing from Warsaw in his teens, he traveled first to Vilna, where he pursued his secular education and joined a promising group of young Yiddish poets; then on to Berlin, the metropolis of science and philosophy in the twenties, where he immersed himself in the culture of the West and began to publish his first books and establish his career. For a short time he succeeded Martin Buber in Frankfurt, but was soon forced to flee the encroaching Nazi horde, by the way of Poland and England, to America. The burden of his years in the United States were spent at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City, where from his small, crowded study, a series of major works emanated to a growing number of readers in America and beyond.

In Eastern Europe Heschel acquitted his ancestral Jewish learning and piety; in Berlin, philosophy, method and European culture; in America, within the blessings of the free society which he treasured, the full extent of his powers was reached. But regardless of where he traveled, Heschel's steps were ever pointed toward the Holy Land, and whatever the city in which he lived, his home was always Jerusalem.

Our age is one where men know more and more about less and less. Heschel's genius embraced a number of fields. He wrote seminal works on the Bible, the Talmud, medieval thought, philosophy, theology, hasidism, and contemporary moral problems. He was a theologian, a poet, a mystic, a social reformer, and a historian. Indeed, the best of the whole tradition of Israel, its way of thought and life, found a unique synthesis in him. Rooted in the most authentic sources of Israel's faith, Heschel's audience reached beyond creedal boundaries. He was easily the most respected Jewish voice for Protestants and Catholics: his friendship with Reinhold Niebuhr was memorable and his crucial role at Vatican II has yet to be described. A token of the esteem in which Catholics held Heschel, among the tributes accorded him after his death in 1972, was an entire issue of *America* magazine devoted to his memory, unusual in any case and duplicated for no other Jew. The years since his passing, far from dimming his person, cast in even brighter relief the unique role he played on the contemporary scene, a role no Jew, or Gentile for that matter, has since filled.

A master of English prose, though he knew little of that language when he arrived in America in 1939, Heschel, like his hasidic forebearers, had the gift of combining profundity with simplicity. He found just the right word not only to express what he thought but to evoke what he felt, startling the mind and delighting the heart as well as addressing and challenging the whole person. There are passages in this collection which, once encountered, will be taken up again and again, until they are absorbed into one's inner life.

Reading Heschel is to peer into the heart of that rarest of human phenomena, the holy man. For he was one of those who experienced the presence and the power of the living God, before Whom he walked both in the cloistered seclusion of prayer and study, and in the very maelstrom of our society. To Heschel the question of religion is not "what man does with his solitude," but "what man does with the presence of God": how to think, feel, act; how to live in a way which is compatible with our being a likeness of God; how to *be* what one *is*; how to so conduct ourselves that our lives can be answered to God's question. Driven by the scholar's study by the very words of the prophets he pondered, issues of the time. Vietnam, civil rights, racism, poverty, Russian Jewry, Israel—all were agonizing objects of his concern to sacrifice his own research. He became a "commanding voice" on behalf of the "plundered poor." As with Amos and Jeremiah, "God was raging in his words." Indeed, after an encounter with him, it was not unusual for people to come away with the feeling that one of the prophets of Israel had suddenly risen up before them. He wrote what he thought and lived what he wrote. To Heschel, wonder

leads to piety, and piety to holy deeds; for without the deed, wonder and piety are incomplete. And the deed, he taught, is always possible because man is not alone; God is ever in search of him.

“Emblazoned over the gates of the world in which we live is the escutcheon of the demons. The mark of Cain in the face of man has come to foreshadow the likeness of God.” So Heschel wrote while still living in Hitler’s Germany. The nineteenth century saw the shaking of the foundations of faith in God. We who dwell in the twentieth century are experiencing the collapse of faith in the rival who was to replace Him; man. Poets applaud the absurd, novelists explore the decadent, and men prostrate themselves before the deities of lust and power. Our obsession is with human flesh. The ghoul who devours it is the latest film craze; the science of feeding it, firming it up, and preparing it for fornication, the most popular theme in literature. Daily we are bombarded by lurid reports on the mass-killer, the rapist, and the corrupt bureaucrat. The fantasies of even little children are now people with pervers and the radiated dead. Who will speak of those who do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly? At such time we need nothing so much as to be reminded of the divine image in which we are framed, of man’s purpose on earth. I am aware of no writer who has done this more powerfully, more eloquently, and more convincingly than Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.

He knew he was the descendent of a people who ever since Sinai was destined to “dwell apart” and whose vacation was to be a witness to the living God amidst all the idolatries of history. Because he was spared from the flames which devoured his family, his community, and that whole irreplaceable world of learning and piety in Eastern Europe which alone could have produced him, he felt a special “burden” had been placed upon his shoulders. It was to remind men, with a testimony all the more convincing since it came from one who had experienced the fullness of evil, that despite the absurd and the apathy, the world is filled with mystery, meaning, and mercy, with wonder, joy, and fulfillment; that men have power to do God’s will, and that the divine image in which we are made, though distorted, cannot be obliterated. In the end, the likeness of God will triumph over the mark of Cain.

Heschel’s writing is an embarrassment of riches. So compelling are his sentences that a paragraph literally chokes from wealth. One reader, overwhelmed by this plenty, suggested studying Heschel like a page of the Talmud, that is, weighing with care each sentence, each phrase, each word.

To allow the reader to stand still and dwell upon a word, or a phrase, or a sentence, that he might better taste the whole wheat of Heschel’s thought, in contrast to the sustained thinking of his writings, and following the adage that less is more, I have at times restructured the printed page toward this end.

This book is an act of gratitude to God for the vision and the way of Abraham Heschel.

Samuel H. Dresner

Page 1:

God is of no importance
unless He is of supreme importance.

Page 1 – 2:

Citizens of two realms, we all must sustain a dual allegiance: we sense the ineffable in one realm, we name and exploit reality in another. Between the two we set up a system of reference, but we can never fill the gap. They are as far and as close to each other as time and calendar, as violin and melody, as life and what lies beyond the last breath.

Page 2:

Its flutter in music, its ornament science, but what it conceals is inscrutable. Its silence remains unbroken; no words can carry it away.

Sometimes we wish the world could cry and tell us about that which made it pregnant with fear-filling grandeur.

Sometimes we wish our own heart would speak of that which made it heavy with wonder.

Page 4:

For things are not mute:

the stillness is full of demands, awaiting a soul to breathe in the mystery that all things exhale in their craving for communion.

Page 4:

Palimpsest

We do not have to discover the world of faith; we only have to recover it. It is not a terra incognita, an unknown land; it is a forgotten land, and our relation to God is a palimpsest rather than a tabula rasa. There is no one who has no faith. Every one of us stood at the foot of Sinai and beheld the voice that proclaimed, I am the Lord thy God.

Page 5 – 6:

Afterthought

In asserting: God exists, we merely bring down over-powering reality to the level of thought. Our belief is but an afterthought.

The transition from obliviousness to an awareness of God, is not a leap over a missing link in a syllogism but a retreat, giving up premises rather than adding one.

Faith Is a Blush

God

is unwilling to be alone,

and man

cannot forever remain impervious

to what He longs to show.

Those of us who cannot keep their striving back

find themselves at times

within the sight of the unseen

and become aglow with its rays

Some of us blush,

others wear a mask.

Faith is a blush

in the presence of God.

The Right of Interpretation

We must beware lest we violate the holy,

lest our dogmas overthink the mystery,

lest our psalms sing it away.

The right of interpretation

is given only to one who covers his face,

“afraid to look at God,”

to one who, when the vision is forced upon him,

says:

“I am undone...

for mine eyes have seen the King.”

We can only drink the flow of thoughts
out of the rock of their words.

Page 7:
Ineffable

To meditative minds the ineffable is cryptic, inarticulate: dots, marks of secret meaning, scattered hints, to be gathered, deciphered and formed into evidence; while in moments of insight the ineffable is a metaphor in a forgotten mother tongue.

Page 7:
Light in the Cage

The world in which we live is a vast cage within a maze, high as our mind, wide as our power of will, long as our life span. Those who have never reached the rails or seen what is beyond the cage know of no freedom to dream of and are willing to rise and fight for civilizations that come and go and sink into the abyss of oblivion, an abyss which they never fill.

Page 8:

The ineffable has shuddered itself into the soul. It has entered our consciousness like a ray of light passing into a lake. Refraction of that penetrating ray brings about a turning in our mind: We are penetrated by His insight. We cannot think any more as if He were there and we here. He is both there and here. He is not *a being*, but *being in and beyond all beings*.

Page 10:
Starving for God

Some men go on a hunger strike in the prison of the mind, starving for God. There is joy, ancient and sudden, in this starving. There is reward, a gasp of the intangible, in the flaming reverie breaking through the bars of thought.

Page 11:

And when the waves of that yearning swell in our souls
all the barriers are pushed aside:
the crust of callousness,
 the hysteria of vanity,
 the orgies of arrogance.

Page 13:

Is it music?

Take away from me the noise of your songs
And to the melody of your lyrics I will not listen.

(Amos 5:23)

Is it prayer?

When you spread out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
Though you make many a prayer,
I will not listen;
Your hands are full of bloodshed.

Is it sacrifice?

Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings
and sacrifices
as much as in obedience to the voice of
the Lord?

(I Samuel 15:22)

Page 14:

He not only rules the world in the majesty of His might; He is personally concerned and even stirred by the conduct and fate of man.

“His mercy is upon all His works.” (Psalms 145:9)

Page 14:

Church and God

We worry a great deal about the problem of church and state. Now what about the church and God? Sometimes there seems to be a greater separation between the church and God than between the church and state.

Page 15:

What God means is expressed in the words: “For Thy kindness is better than life” (Psalms 63:4)

Page 15:

Like a Bell

Faith is not the clinging to a shrine but an endless pilgrimage of the heart. Audacious longing, burning songs, daring thoughts, an impulse overwhelming the heart, usurping the mind—these are all a drive towards serving Him who rings our hearts like a bell. It is as if He were waiting to enter our empty, perishing lives.

Page 16:

The Holy Dimension

What gives rise to faith is not a sentiment, a state of mind, an aspiration, but an everlasting fact in the universe, something which is prior to and independent of human knowledge and experience—the *holy dimension* of all existence. The objective side of religion is the spiritual constitution of the universe, the divine values invested in every being and exposed to the mind and will of man; an ontological relation. This is why the objective of the divine side of religion eludes psychological and sociological analysis.

Page 17:

Just as man lives in the realm of nature and is subject to its laws, so does he find himself in the holy dimension. He can escape its bounds as little as he can take leave of nature. He can sever himself from the dimension of the holy neither by sin nor by stupidity, neither by apostasy nor by ignorance. There is no escape from God.

Page 17:

In this sense, *faith is faithfulness*, loyalty to an event, loyalty in our response.

Page 18:

Tragic is the embarrassment of the man of faith. “My tears have been my food day and night, while they say unto me all the day, where is thy God?” (Psalms 42:4). “Where are all His marvelous works which our father told us of?” (Nehemiah 6:13; see Psalms 44:2). “How long, O Lord, wilt Thou hide Thyself perpetually?” (Psalms 89:47), “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” (Psalms 22:2).

Why, we often ask in our prayers, hast Thou made it so difficult to find Thee? Why must we encounter so much anguish and travail before we can catch a glance of Thy presence? What a sad spectacle are the honest efforts of the great minds to prove Thy existence! And why dost Thou permit faith to blend so easily with bigotry, arrogance, cruelty, folly and superstition?

O Lord, why dost Thou make us err from Thy ways
And harden our hearts, so that we fear Thee not?

(Isaiah 63:17)

Page 18:

Signposts and Testimonies

We cannot make Him visible to us, but we can make ourselves visible to Him. So we open our thoughts to Him—feeble out tongues, but sensitive our hearts. We see more than we can say. The trees stand like guards of the Everlasting; the flowers like signposts of His goodness—only we have failed to be testimonies to His presence, tokens of His trust.

Page 19:

It sometimes happens that the life of a pious man becomes so involved in God that his heart overflows as though it were a cup in the hand of God.

Page 19:

Dogmas

Are dogmas unnecessary?

We cannot be in rapport with the reality of the divine except for rare, fugitive moments. How can those moments be saved for the long hours of functional living, when the thoughts that feed like bees on the inscrutable desert us and we lose the sight and the drive?

Dogmas are like amber in which bees, once alive, are embalmed, and are capable of being electrified when our minds become exposed to the power of the ineffable.