

Few Hasidic masters have taught or learnt at Hebrew Union College during the last 125 years. Perhaps the man who came closest to this description was Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972). Heschel brought his Polish Hasidic sensibilities with him from Europe, and he presented them in a radical humanitarian form for an American public hungry for spiritual depth. He may not have been a Hasidic master, but he cannot be understood without recourse to his Hasidic heritage.

Perhaps the greatest influence on the young Heschel was the spiritual legacy of Rabbi Judah Aryeh Leib Alter (1847-1905), the *Gerer Rebbe*. In tribute to Heschel and his brief but significant time at HUC (1939-1945), I want to relate to a teaching of Judah Aryeh in his extraordinary work, *Sefat Emet*, and to track the idea as it was preserved and transformed by Heschel. The subject is one which featured centrally in much of Heschel's work: the relationship between the dimension of time and the dimension of space.

In a source dated 1899, Alter describes the relationship between humanity and time in this way:

“Human beings transcend time. The passage of time depends on the deeds of humankind. Time is purified according to the purity of human deeds; humanity gives both time and

space their essence.” (*Hayyei Sarah*) Alter adopts here a radically humanistic approach. Both space and time are mediated through the prism of human consciousness and influenced by the moral force of human deeds. To be sure, not every person can have this impact on the metaphysical order:

“There are souls who need support from the dimensions of time and space. And yet there are souls which illuminate time and space...the lives of the righteous transcend time.” For Alter, the *zaddik*, the holy and pious hero, stands beyond time.

Rabbi Michael Marmor
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Abraham Joshua Heschel put time at the very heart of his theological enterprise. In his classic work, *The Sabbath*, Heschel reflects that the apparent permanence of space is an illusion. That which matters most cannot be embodied in space, but it can be sensed in time. “It is the dimension of time wherein man meets God...”

For Alter, whose thoughts and approach to life Heschel imbibed with his mother's milk, human beings can defy time, and mold it. For Heschel, on the other hand, the relationship between space, time and “man” (Heschel's term) is quite different: “Technical civilization...is man's triumph over space. Yet time remains impervious. We can overcome distance but can neither recapture the past nor dig out the future. Man transcends space, and time transcends man.” It is important to note that



▲ *Lost Synagogues of Europe, Torah Mantles, Carol Minarick and Geri Forkner*

in this formulation, we cannot rule time. Yet in the *Sefat Emet*, written by the father of Heschel's childhood tutor, the message is quite different: certain human beings can indeed influence time.

Why did Heschel alter the message of Alter? What had changed in

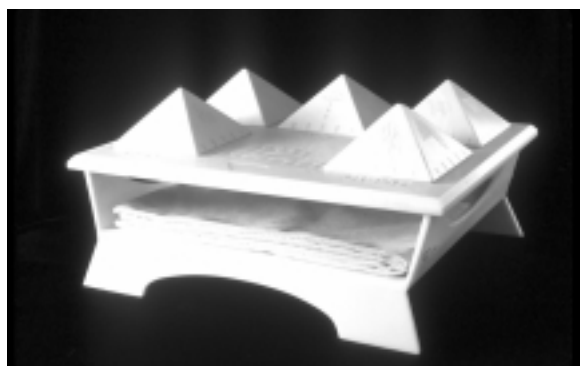
the world to make the idea that mankind could control time impossible for Heschel? In a reversal of expectations, the nineteenth-century traditionalist puts humanity at the center, whilst the twentieth-century modernist stresses that time transcends us: we cannot own or manipulate it.

For Heschel, the Sabbath is the perpetual symbol of humankind's less-than-ultimate control:

“To gain control of the world of space is certainly one of our tasks. The danger begins when in gaining power in the realm of space we forfeit all aspirations in the realm of time. There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord. Life goes wrong when the control of space, the acquisitions of things in space, becomes our sole concern.”

Heschel lived through the events of the first half of the twentieth century, in which men had believed that they could create a Thousand Year Reich. He believed that

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▲ *In Every Generation We Shall Overturn the Pyramids, Seder Plate, Chava Wolpert Richard*

A CENTURY AND MORE

Hebrew Poetry and the Swift Chariot

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This compressed history of ours—from the pre-historic ape to the techno man, to the reversal that the stopwatch is invented before chess—could probably only be believable in a poem. Just as the full strain of time's attack on each of us might itself best exist in the poetic heterocosm:

The Portrait:

The boy

Does not sit still,

And I can't quite capture his lines.

I draw one while the wrinkles in his face multiply

While I dip my pen

His lips twist and his hair becomes white

His bluing skin peels from his bones. And he disappears.

The old man is gone,

So what is to become of me.

Each of these poems exploits at least one glaring reference to ancient text: The portrait painter utters the very lines that jump from Reuven's self-concerned mind when he finds that the abused Joseph is missing from the pit. "Hayeled einenu, va'ani ana ani ba," The boy is gone, what will happen to me. (Reuven is the older brother responsible for his brother's well-being). Relying heavily on the gorgeous sound of that line in Hebrew, the poet not only appropriates a verse intended for a situation of the moment and powerful enough for a larger existential question, but he signals that the ancient lives within the present. "Likrat," even more elaborately mixes the ancient world with the present, and the port reminds us that the epoch (in Hebrew "Idan") was full of sun – an "Eden" indeed, which was perhaps not a garden, but an entire forest, not inhabited so much by people as by primates. But something happened, it began to get colder, and the apes have murmured their way towards clothing, stopwatches and chess – the tools of civilization that is modern life as we came to know it from the Middle Ages to the present. Modernity already?! Old age already!? Va-ani, ana ani ba? What of us? And what of us?

In Memoriam

John Bergreen, beloved son of Adele and Morris Bergreen.

Morris Bergreen, treasured member of the Board of Governors for more than three decades, member of the Executive Committee, Chair of the Library, Museum and Archives Committee, and President of the Skirball Foundation.

Rabbi Alan D. Bregman, esteemed alumnus of the Cincinnati School, Coordinator of Adult Jewish Living and Learning, and Director of Alumni Relations, HUC-JIR.

John Levine, beloved son of Aaron Levine, a member of the New York Board of Overseers.

Alter and Heschel on Jewish Time

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keeping the Sabbath was not only a ritual act: it was a statement of humanity's proper place in the world.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the Gerer *Rebbe* had looked with optimism at an almost unbridled human potential. Scarred by war and loss, Heschel kept faith with humanity, but held that we must acknowledge our submission to the passage of time, as we acknowledge the very presence of God who searches for us.

The style of Judaism reflected and refined at HUC-JIR over the last 125 years is far

away from Polish piety, but it has in common this same ambivalence towards human potential. We believe that humanity can make its mark on time, but we are alarmed at the idea of an all-powerful Superman, cut loose from the moorings of morality and the great anchor of time.

The story of the Jew in modernity is the story of this tension between the belief in human potential and the dread of human self-deification. Consciousness of time is not simply a mark of punctuality or an emblem of history. It is a safeguard for humanity.

TEACHING STUDENTS HOW TO TRANSFORM THEIR SYNAGOGUES:

The Synagogue 2000 Approach

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observed that they can extend to their synagogue lives. For applying what they learn in class, the students emphasized the importance of the details. Rabbi Philip Rice ('01) focused on the details for creating a friendlier environment in the synagogue by using a welcoming vocabulary, and placing signage that makes navigating within the building easier. He remarked that Synagogue 2000 is "really working. It's not just theory." Cantor Rosalie Will Boxt ('01) emphasized the process of taking people from where they are to where they want to go, stating that "each person needs to grow at his or her own level."

Synagogue 2000 speaks of a guiding acronym: "PISGAH" (literally, mountain summit), the initials which represent six areas where innovation is required – Prayer, Institutional Infrastructural Deepening, Study, Good Deeds, Ambience, and Healing. Reform, Conservative, and traditional congregations all across North America are currently implementing this unique cross-denominational approach to revitalizing the synagogue.

The class and the program are working. To become involved or for additional information, please contact Harriet Lewis at (212) 824-2228 or harriet@s2k.org.