

COMMON GROUND

Excerpts from an unpublished essay by Susannah Heschel on *The Relationship and the Theological and Scriptural Threads of Connection between the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel*

The photograph of Abraham Joshua Heschel walking arm in arm with Martin Luther King, Jr., in the front row of marchers at Selma has become an icon of American Jewish life, and of Black-Jewish relations.

The relationship between the two men began in January, 1963 at a conference on religion and race sponsored by the National Conference of Christians and Jews.

It became a genuine friendship of affection as well as a relationship of two colleagues working together in political causes. As King encouraged Heschel's involvement in the Civil Rights movement, Heschel encouraged King to take a public stance against the war in Vietnam. When the Conservative rabbis of America gathered in 1968 to celebrate Heschel's 60th birthday, the keynote speaker they invited was Dr. King. Ten days later, when Dr. King was assassinated, the rabbi Mrs. King invited to speak at the funeral was Dr. Heschel.

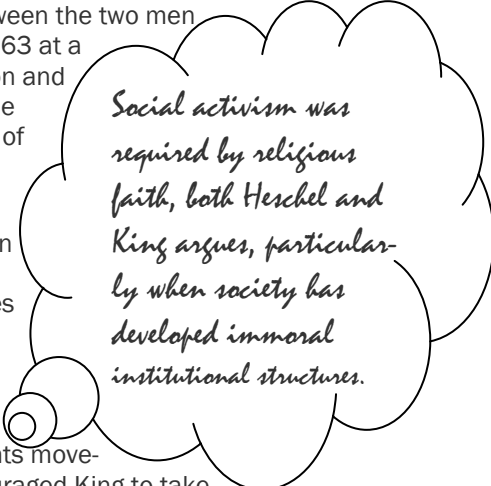
What is considered so remarkable about their relationship is the incongruity of Heschel, a refugee from Hitler's Europe who was born into a Hasidic rebbe's family in Warsaw and who wore a long white beard and yarmulke, involving himself with a minister from the conservative African-American church. However, both men did leave the worlds of their family as young men to study in a more liberal atmosphere: King at the Crozer Theological Seminary and Boston University and

Heschel at the University of Berlin.

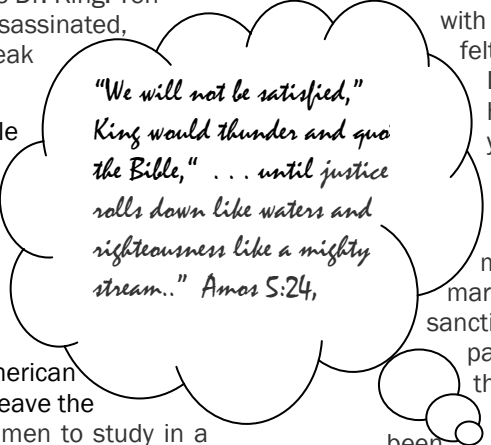
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In 1965, Heschel joined King's famous civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery; it was a major event in his life. On Friday, March 19, two days before the Selma march was scheduled to begin, Heschel (who had just led a march at FBI headquarters protesting the brutal treatment received by civil rights demonstrators) received a telegram from King, inviting him to join the marchers in Selma. Heschel flew to Selma from New York on Saturday night and was welcomed as one of the leaders into the front row of marchers with King, Ralph Bunche, and Ralph Abernathy. Each of them wore flower leis, brought by Hawaiian delegates. In an unpublished memoir he wrote upon returning from Selma, Heschel contrasted the extreme hostility he encountered from whites in Alabama that week from the moment he arrived at the airport, with the kindness he was shown by Dr. King's assistants, particularly Reverend Andrew Young, who hovered over him during the march with great concern.

Upon his return, Heschel described his experience in a diary entry: "I thought of having walked with Hasidic rabbis on various occasions. I felt a sense of the Holy in what I was doing. Dr. King expressed several times to me his appreciation. He said, 'I cannot tell you how much your presence means to us.' You cannot imagine how often Reverend C.T. Vivian and I speak about you." Shortly after returning from the march, he wrote to King: "The day we marched together out of Selma was a day of sanctification. That day I hope will never be past to me - that day will continue to be this day. I am glad to belong to infamy. May I add that I have rarely in my life been privileged to hear a sermon as glorious as the one you delivered at the service in Selma prior to the march."



Social activism was required by religious faith, both Heschel and King argues, particularly when society has developed immoral institutional structures.



"We will not be satisfied," King would thunder and quote the Bible, "... until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream..." Amos 5:24,

For Heschel, the march had major spiritual significance; he felt, he wrote "as though my legs were praying."

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What linked Heschel and King theologically was their reading of the Bible, particularly of the prophets. Everything else grew out of that understanding: the nature of morality, of prayer, as well as the centrality of political commitments.

King related his political activities to the biblical narrative. His comparison of what is (sic) occurring in Alabama with the Exodus from Egypt, for instance, is not simply a politically astute use of a biblical story, but an effort to transfigure the participants into the biblical realm, in which actions have consequences for the divine plan of history. Political activism is not simply history; it is actually salvation being played out within the realm of [G-D].

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Heschel also used Exodus imagery when writing about civil rights, but he used the imagery to rebuke white audiences for their racism. American Jews, too, were Egyptians, in Heschel's retelling. "The exodus began", he said, "but is far from having been completed. In fact it was easier for the children of Israel to cross the Red Sea than for a Negro to cross certain university campuses." Heschel reminded his audiences that Israelites, just after leaving Egypt, had complained of the bitter water they found at Marah, asking Moses, "What shall we drink?" Chiding his audience, Heschel continued: "This episode seems shocking. What a comedown! Only three days earlier they had reached the highest peak of prophetic and spiritual exaltation, and now they complain about such a prosaic and unspiritual item as water.

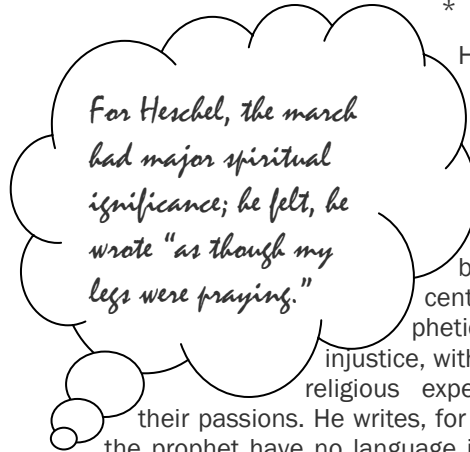
The Negroes of America behave just like the children of Israel. Only in 1963 they experienced the miracle of having turned the tide of history, the joy of finding millions of Americans involved in the struggle for civil rights, the exaltation of fellowship, the March to Washington. Now only a few months later they have the audacity to murmur: "What shall we drink? We want adequate education, decent housing, proper employment." How ordinary, how unpoetic, how annoying!

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If the dominant narrative of the Civil Rights movement was the Exodus, and the most important single verse from the Bible is taken from Amos.

"We will not be satisfied," King would thunder and quote the Bible, "until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." Amos 5:24, an anthem of the movement, is engraved at King's memorial in Atlanta. In quoting Amos, King joined his movement with the Hebrew prophetic tradition which addressed itself to the strong and influential in the community demanding that they turn from oppression and do justice to the poor.

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Heschel's achievement (picked up by King's mentors, the teachers of the liberal Protestant movements) was to bring to the fore the centrality of the prophetic critique of social injustice, without neglecting the religious experience underlying their passions. He writes, for example: "We and the prophet have no language in common. To us, the moral state of society, for all its stains and spots, seems fair and trim; to the prophet it is dreadful. So many deeds of charity are done, so much decency radiates day and night; yet to the prophet satiety of the conscience is prudery and flight from responsibility. Our standards are modest; our sense of injustice tolerable, timid; our moral indignation impermanent; yet human violence is interminable, unbearable, permanent...The prophet's ear perceives even the silent sigh."

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Therefore, to Heschel and King, religion and belief in [G-D] without prophetic indignation at political evils is impossible. Heschel's words, "The opposite of good is not evil, the opposite of good is indifference" were translated into a political slogan, "In a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible." King wrote in a similar vein: "To accept passively an unjust system is to cooperate with that system...the oppressed oppressor. Not to communicate to the oppressor that his actions are morally right." Social activism was required by religious faith, both Heschel and King argues, particularly when society has developed immoral institutional structures. "Your highest loyalty is to [G-D]," said King, "and not to the mores, or folkways, the state, or the nation or any man-made institution."

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Their common understanding of the prophets and of the connections between faith and political engagement was the motivation that brought both men to speak out against the war in Vietnam, despite the political consequences. Heschel was the founder, together with Richard John Neuhaus and John Bennett, of an anti-war organization, known as Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam, which he established in the fall of 1965. Even as social protest was for him a religious experience, religion without indignation at political evils was also impossible: "To speak about [G-D] and remain silent on Vietnam is blasphemous," he wrote. Over and over, in speeches at universities, synagogues, and antiwar rallies, he denounced the murder of innocent people in Southeast Asia. "However difficult it may be to stop the war today," he said, "it will be even more difficult tomorrow; the killing must end now."

Whether or not Dr. King should speak out publicly against the war in Vietnam was a topic that preoccupied Heschel during the years between 1965 and 1967. Would his public opposition to the war hurt the Civil Rights movement? Which was the better political course, and which was the greater moral good? King came under severe attack for his opposition. Major newspapers within both the black and white communities editorialized against him, and civil rights leaders including Ralph Bunche, Whitney Young, Roy Wilkins, Jackie Robinson and Senator Edward Brooke publicly criticized him.

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Theologically as well as politically, King and Heschel recognized their own strong kinship. For each there was an emphatic stress on the dependence of the political on the spiritual, [G-D] on human society, the moral life on economic well-being. Both Heschel and

King spoke of each other as prophets. On March 25, 1968, just ten days before he was assassinated, King delivered the keynote address at a birthday celebration honoring Heschel. In his introduction of King to the audience, Heschel asked, "Where in America today do we hear a voice like the voice of the prophets of Israel? Martin Luther King is a sign that [G-D] has not forsaken the United States of America. [G-D] has sent him to us. His presence is the hope of America. His mission is sacred, his leadership of supreme importance to every one of us." In his address, King stated that Heschel "is indeed a truly great prophet." He went on, "here and there we find those who refuse to remain silent behind the safe security of stained glass windows, and they are forever seeking to make the great ethical insights of our Judeo-Christian heritage relevant in this day and in this age. I feel that Rabbi Heschel is one of the persons who is relevant at all times, always standing with prophetic insights to guide us through these difficult days."

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Neither community today has voices of moral leadership comparable to the voices of King and Heschel. The prophetic mood they created has been replaced by voices of witness that speak about the racism and anti-Semitism of our society, but without offering the transcendent religious vision they provided. The moments of transcendence that predominated in the Civil Rights era has shifted to one of cynicism. Perhaps if the memory of that era and the symbolism of the friendship between Heschel and King survives, it will one day inspire the transformation that remains so badly needed.

Thanks to Rhona Lyons for editing this piece.

