

In Search of Heschel

Philosopher

While I still maintain the soundness of the method described above [that adopted in *Die Prophetie*], which in important aspects reflects the method of phenomenology, I have long since become wary of impartiality, which is itself a way of being partial. [1962]

Poet

God follows me everywhere –
Spins a net of glances around me,
shines upon my sightless back like the sun.

God follows me like a forest everywhere.
My lips, filled with wonder, are fully numb, dumb,
like a child who blunders upon an ancient holy place..

God follows me like a shiver everywhere.
The desire in me is for rest: the demand within me is: Rise up,
see how prophetic visions lie neglected in the streets! ... [1933]

Silence hovers all the mountain peaks. The world is aflame with grandeur. Each flame is an outpouring of love. Each being speaks for itself. Man alone can speak for all beings. Human living alone enacts the mystery as a drama. [1964]

Outsider

I am the most maladjusted person in society.

Theologian of the Deed

A Jew is asked to take a *leap of action* rather than a *leap of thought*: to surpass his needs, to do more than he understands in order to understand more than he does. In carrying out the word of the Torah he is ushered into the presence of spiritual meaning. Through the ecstasy of deeds he learns to be certain of the presence of God. [1953]

Hasid

What is so exciting about Hasidism is that it faces existence as it is without camouflage. It is open to tragedy and suffering, it opens up sources of compassion and insight. My father used to tell me a story about our grandfather, the lover of Israel. He was asked by many other rebbes, "How come that your prayers are always accepted and our prayers are not?" He gave the following answer: "You see, whenever some Jew comes to see me and pours out his heart and tells me of his misery and suffering. I have such compassion that a little hole is created in my heart. Since I have listened to a great many Jews with their problem and anguish, there are a great many holes in my heart. I'm an old Jew, and when I start to pray, I take my heart and place it before God. He sees this broken heart, so many holes, so many splits, so He has compassion for my heart and that's why He listens to me. He listens to my prayers. [1972]

Scholar

...Heschel is to be considered as one of the very few thinkers of our times who endeavored to offer a comprehensive picture for the whole realm of Jewish phenomena, while simultaneously structuring a philosophy of religion of his own. [Moshe Idel]

Prophet of Pathos

If I had to make a statement about God, one that is fundamental in Judaism, it would be that God is *in search of man*. It is the fundamental statement in the inner life of a human being in relation to God in the world. If I were to summarize all of human history as seen in the Bible, it would be a simple formula: *God in search of man*. [1969]

Prayer

The main ends of prayer are to move God, to let Him participate in our lives, and to interest ourselves in Him. What is the meaning of praise if not to make His concern our own? Worship is an act of inner agreement with God. We can petition Him for things we need only when we are sure of His sympathy for us. [1945]

Activist

The more deeply immersed I became in the thinking of the prophets, the more powerfully it became clear to me what the lives of the prophets sought to convey: that morally speaking there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings. It also became clear to me that in regard to cruelties committed in the name of a free society, some are guilty, while all are responsible. [1972]

Seeker of Wonder

The world presents itself in two ways to me. The world as a thing I own, the world as a mystery I face. What I own is a trifle, what I face is sublime. I am careful not to waste what I own: I must learn not to miss what I face. We manipulate what is available on the surface of the world: we must also stand in awe before the mystery of the world. We objectify being but we are also present at Being in wonder, in radical amazement. All we have is a sense of awe and radical amazement in the face of a mystery that staggers our ability to sense it... [1964]

Pioneer of Interfaith

No religion is an island. We are all involved with one another. Spiritual betrayal on the part of one of us affects the faith of all of us...

Perhaps it is the will of God that in this eon there should be diversity in our forms of devotion and commitment to Him. In this eon diversity of religions is the will of God. [1966]

Advocate of Polarity

Jewish thinking and living can only be adequately understood in terms of a dialectic pattern, containing opposite or contrasted properties. As in a magnet, the ends of which have opposite magnetic qualities, these terms are opposite to one another and exemplify a *polarity* which lies at the very heart of Judaism, the polarity of ideas and events, of mitzvah and sin, of kavanah and deed, of regularity and spontaneity, of uniformity and individuality, of halacha and agada, of law and inwardness, of love and fear, of understanding and obedience, of joy and discipline, of the good and the evil drive, of time and eternity, of this world and the world to come, of revelation and response, of insight and information, of empathy and self-expression, of creed and faith, of the word and that which is beyond words, of man's quest for God and God in search of man. [1955]

Keeper of the Sabbath

We must conquer space in order to sanctify time. All week long we are called upon to sanctify life through employing things of space. On the Sabbath it is given to us to share in the holiness that is in the heart of time. [1951]

Social Critic

As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our sense of mind. Mankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder. [1955]

Educator

What we need more than anything else is not *textbooks* but *textpeople*. [1953]

Loving Critic of Contemporary Religion

It is customary to blame secular science and anti-religious philosophy for the eclipse of religion in modern society. It would be more honest to blame religion for its own defeats. Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. [1955]