



## **Heschel on Prophecy: Spirituality and Activism**

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As vice chancellor for Religious Life and Engagement, Rabbi Gordon Tucker focuses on enhancing Jewish life at JTS, enriching our study of Judaism with the joy and deep understanding that only lived experience can provide. A leading scholar and interpreter of Conservative Judaism, he also articulates the enduring power of JTS's compelling approach to Jewish law and Jewish life, while strengthening JTS's religious leadership through partnerships with organizations in the Conservative Movement and beyond.

Rabbi Tucker's current role brings him back to JTS, where he served as dean of The Rabbinical School from 1984 to 1992 and as assistant professor of Jewish Thought from 1979 to 1994. He was ordained at JTS in 1975 after receiving his A.B. at Harvard College. He also earned a PhD in Philosophy from Princeton University.

Rabbi Tucker served from 1994 to 2018 as senior rabbi of one of North America's foremost Conservative congregations, Temple Israel Center in White Plains, NY. Under his leadership, the synagogue flourished and was characterized by vibrant communal life and an exceptional devotion to Jewish learning.

Rabbi Tucker is the author of scores of articles on Jewish theology and law, and published *Heavenly Torah*, a translation of and commentary on Abraham Joshua Heschel's three-volume work on rabbinic theology. An anthology of his writings was published in 2014, under the title *Torah for its Intended Purpose*. Most recently, his new commentary on *Pirkei Avot* was published by the Rabbinical Assembly in 2018.

## A. PROPHECY AS SPIRITUAL COMMUNION

### **1. Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 11a**

The Sages taught: After the last of the prophets, Haggai, Zekhariah, and Malakhi died, the Divine Spirit of prophetic revelation departed from the Jewish people. But nevertheless, they were still utilizing a Divine Voice. One time, a group of Sages were reclining in the loft of the house of Guryah in Jericho, and a Divine Voice was bestowed upon them from Heaven, saying: There is one here who is fit for the Divine Presence to rest upon him as it rested upon Moses our teacher, but his generation is not deserving of this distinction. The Sages set their eyes upon Hillel the Elder. And when he died, the Sages said about him: Alas, the pious man, alas, the humble man, a disciple of Ezra.

### **2. A.J. Heschel, "Prophetic Inspiration in the Middle Ages," in *Prophetic Inspiration After the Prophets*, trans. M. Faierstein, 1996, pp. 6-8**

In many generations there were people who claimed to be or of whom it was said that they were recipients of the Spirit. These exalted ones strove to enter the *Pardes* and to merit the infusion of supernal knowledge. Indeed, they believed that they had attained their goal. This achievement, although limited in terms of its impact upon the life of the masses, was of great importance in the spiritual odyssey of the elect. The supremacy of natural reason could not slake desire. Many of the sages remained dissatisfied with the knowledge attainable by rational means. Their souls longed for the hidden wisdom conferred upon man by divine grace.....

The testimonies concerning the inner life of the sages are few. Isolated individual occurrences, whose worth was momentary and whose content made no difference in the conduct of religious law, were deemed unworthy of being written down. Moreover, matters involving prophetic inspiration were matters about which one remained close-mouthed. He who had achieved this spiritual rung would seal his lips, bridle his tongue, and conceal it under a canopy of secrecy. Nevertheless, whoever seeks diligently will find sufficient material with regard to the attainment of this level of spirituality.....

This matter should not be taken lightly. Revelation is an indispensable groundwork for religion. He who denies apodictically and *a priori* the possibility of divine communication and sees, as it were, trickery will ultimately conclude that religion originates as illusion. We can neither prove nor disprove these experiences. Nevertheless, to understand the true spirit of Israel it is important to remember that in the heart of the faithful of Israel there is a firm belief that exceptional individuals are singled out for investiture with the divine presence which grants supernal communication, the gift of heavenly thought.

**3. A.J. Heschel, "Did Maimonides Believe that He Had Attained the Rank of Prophet?," in *Prophetic Inspiration After the Prophets*, trans. M. Faierstein, 1996, pp. 95-96**

Maimonides prized prophecy more than any of the modes of knowledge. He was a veritable lion among his fellows; the sovereign master of many disciplines sensed that not all of the gates of wisdom were open to him — that many treasures were hidden from the gaze of logic and that “the human intellect had set its bounds” (Guide I:32). He knew that vis-à-vis many problems, human cognition was stumbling blindly in the dark. “Human knowledge has its limits, and so long as the soul is within the body it cannot know what transcends nature. Since the soul is part of the order of nature, it is impossible that it envision what is Above” (Letter to Hasdai of Alexandria). There are matters to which human cognition is inadequate, “there are some subjects which human reason cannot grasp, nor does it have the means to grasp them and thought wearies itself with that which it cannot comprehend and for the understanding of which it does not have the means...it is either an intrinsic flaw of the rational power or a species of insanity” (Guide II:24). There exists therefore “a level of knowledge higher than that of the philosophers and that level is — prophecy” (Letter to Hasdai). With its aid man can grasp that which eludes the power of rationality. A philosopher, no matter how perfect, cannot occupy that position held by a prophet. Even Aristotle, the “perfect exemplar of human knowledge”, is of inferior worth by comparison with those “influenced by the heavenly overflow to the extent that they have attained the prophetic rank, than which there is no higher rung” (letter to Samuel ibn Tibbon).

Maimonides treats of prophecy in full detail in the *Mishneh Torah* as something ubiquitous in all places and times, without once mentioning that it is no longer operative in Israel. Did his silence concerning its disappearance allude to the opinion that prophecy was attainable, or was it reminiscent of the doctrine that prophecy would someday return to Israel? He speaks of it as something which one could acquire: “A Man who is perfected in all these traits.....the Holy Spirit will immediately rest upon him.” The word “immediately” sparkles in this context.

Prophecy was, therefore, neither remote nor inaccessibly sequestered in the heavens nor hidden in the islands of the sea, for redemption was truly nigh. So he wrote to the Jews of Yemen:

We have a great and wonderful tradition which I have received from the hands of my father, which he in turn received from his fathers extending back to the exiles from Jerusalem.....that in the prophecy of Balaam there is an allusion to the return of prophecy to Israel after its [temporary] cessation.....for what Balaam said, “Now [*ka’et*] it shall be said of Jacob and Israel, “What has God wrought” [Numbers 23:23], hints at the secret, viz., concerning that time one is to calculate its arrival on the basis of the same amount of time that occurred from the six days of creation until then; it is then that the prophets will exclaim, “What has God wrought” .....according to this analogy and this explanation, prophecy is to return to Israel in the year 4970 after the creation [1210 C.E.]. There is no doubt that the return of prophecy is the forerunner of the Messiah.

Maimonides was born in 1135 and died in 1205. He could have hoped to reach his eighties and thus actually see the reinstatement of prophecy....It is inconceivable that a soul such as his, thirsting for perfection, would postpone this state or willingly relinquish the opportunity to seize the day. It is almost certain that this hoped-for consummation was before him always.

#### **4. A.J. Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, 2005, pp. 671-672**

“A Mighty Voice, and No More//A Mighty Voice Without End”

Some say that the standing at Sinai was the end of revelation, and that there can be no innovation after the giving of Torah at Sinai; whatever a diligent student will teach in the future was already spoken to Moses. And there are those who say that the standing at Sinai was not the end of the giving of Torah, nor was it a total revelation. The Holy and Blessed One renews halakhah each day and gives Torah at many times.

‘The Lord spoke these words to your whole congregation at the mountain out of the fire and the dense clouds, with a mighty voice, and no more//without end (וְלֹא יִסַּף - **velo yasaf**)’ (Deuteronomy 5:19). This verse was interpreted in two ways. The first: ‘**velo yasaf**’ means “without end” (so Onkelos and Targum Yerushalmi), “for God’s voice is mighty and eternally enduring” (Rashi — This interpretation is also found in BT Sotah 10b, in the name of Rabbi Samuel bar Ami, who understands Genesis 38:26 to be saying that Judah continued to cohabit with Tamar). The second: ‘**velo yasaf**’ means “God never again appeared so publicly” (the alternative understanding quoted in Rashi).

In the blessing over the Torah, we say “‘who gives the Torah’. In truth, God already gave it, but God still is giving it, with no cessation.” (Shenei Luhot Ha-Berit 25a)

A person must “always see himself, at every moment, as if he is standing at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. For humans are subject to past and future, but God is not, and each and every day God gives the Torah to the people Israel. Therefore, when a person opens any book in order to learn, he should remember at that time the standing at Sinai, as if he received the Torah directly from on high. Thus will he achieve a measure of reverence and awe, just as was the case when the Torah was given in fear and in trembling: ‘and all the people who were in the camp trembled’ (Exodus 19:16).” (Abraham Joshua Heschel of Apt, *Ohev Yisrael*, Ki Tetze).

## B. PROPHECY AS A CALL TO ACTION

### 5. A.J. Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, 2005, pp. 479-482, 484-485, 489-491

Is the Prophet a Partner or a Vessel?

We have been given two approaches to prophecy: (1) Moses our master was merely a vessel that the Holy and Blessed One used, a trumpet that God played; he neither subtracted from, nor added to, what was spoken to him; and (2) Moses our master was a partner in the matter of prophecy.

According to the first approach, the prophet is “as clay in the hand of the potter, who at will lengthens or shortens it.” The persona of the prophet is like the appearance of the moon. Just as the moon receives its light from the sun, not having any light of her own, so the prophet receives divine orders or divine inspiration; he is passive, devoid of initiative. This approach is found in Philo, who sees the prophet simply as a vessel, whom God utilizes in order to reveal God’s will, and who says not a single thing on his own. At the moment that prophecy comes to him the prophet is in a state of ecstasy or is “out-of-body.” His own vital forces leave him, and the spirit of God enters into him, plucks his vocal chords, and the words emanate from his mouth.

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According to Rabbi Akiva, Moses's speaking to Israel was just like The Holy and Blessed One's speaking to Moses. The Holy and Blessed One would give strength and power to Moses, and thus with the same voice that he heard, he would address Israel.

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Just as Rabbi Ishmael emphasized the role of ordinary reason in interpreting the Torah, so did he assign a role to the power of reason in the prophecy of Moses our Master. The prophet is able, with his internal powers, to hit upon the thoughts of God. Moses did things on his own and the Holy and Blessed One agreed with his actions. The prophet participates in the act of prophecy, and thus may even alter the language of the Holy and Blessed One.

Thus did our Rabbis teach: There were things “that Moses spoke before the Holy and Blessed One, and the latter said to him: ‘You have taught me’. When the Holy and Blessed One said to him, ‘visits the iniquity of parents upon children’ (Exodus 34:7), Moses said: ‘Master of the Universe, so many wicked people have given birth to righteous ones. Should the latter have to bear the sins of their parent? Terah worshipped images, and Abraham his son was righteous. Similarly, King Hezekiah was righteous, while Ahaz his father was wicked; and likewise, King Josiah was righteous, while Amon his father was wicked. Is it becoming that the righteous should suffer for their parents' sins?’ Said to him the Holy and Blessed One: ‘You have taught Me; I swear by My life that I will nullify My words and confirm yours, as it says: ‘Parents shall not be put to death for children, nor children be put to death for parents: a person shall be put to death only for his own crime’ (Deuteronomy 24:16). And I swear by My life that I will attribute them in writing to you, as it says, ‘in accordance with what is written in the Book of the Teaching of Moses, where the Lord commanded.....’ (II Kings 14:6).”

## **6. G.D. Cohen, "Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Interpreter of Classical Jewish Thought," Address to Rabbinical Assembly Convention, 1983**

Heschel speaks of prophets as exegetes of the experience of the divine. All prophecy, he feels, is an exegesis of the encounter between man and the divine spirit. That interpretation is neither Orthodox nor secularist. Heschel recognized, as did the Rabbis of the Talmud, that no two prophets spoke in the identical style, or with the identical words. One prophet spoke like a city dweller. Another spoke like a country bumpkin. But each was giving expression to the same type of experience in terms of his own background.

I remember how we...had come to hear this great new luminary who had just arrived from Hebrew Union College. To a large extent, we found him unintelligible. I think the time has come, some thirty-eight years later, to say why.

For half a century, Mordecai M. Kaplan had been the regnant, charismatic force in the Jewish Theological Seminary. And succeeding him, or taking over his role, was a man who spoke not in terms that contradicted Kaplan, but in terms that side-stepped him, indeed, ignored him completely, and reaffirmed the validity, the relevance, and the exegetical applicability of people and systems of thought who and which, as a result of our own historical training, we had come to believe were antiquated, and from a world that had no meaning for us.

We students were not ready to listen to Heschel's reexamination of the past, nor had he been prepared to understand how and why, by the time we students had come to the Seminary, some time between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-five, we were already confirmed critics of traditional beliefs and, on occasion, even secularists. Inevitable, there was a chasm between us.

Heschel understood the loneliness of the long distance thinker. He understood how lonely the philosopher will be in trying to impart a message of transcendence that will speak to one's own age and to future generations. This is what Heschel's legacy means to me. And that is why I find fresh meaning in his words and works ten years after he is gone.

I find myself these days bemoaning the loss of so many years when I did not appreciate the grandeur that homiletics can attain, especially if one really believes that the text speaks to him. We were brought up – let me be candid – very often to have a feeling that a *derashah* was one of those burdens we had to bear as rabbis, that if we were really good we could write textual-philological notes that would outlive us forever. Not sermons. In reality, it is the sermon, the *aggadah*, that has life of its own.

**7. A.J. Heschel, "The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement," in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, 1996, pp. 224-225**

For many years I lived by the conviction that my destiny is to serve in the realm of privacy, to be concerned with the ultimate issues and involved in attempting to clarify them in thought and in word. Loneliness was both a burden and a blessing, and above all, indispensable for achieving a kind of stillness in which perplexities could be faced without fear.

Three events changed my attitude. One was the countless onslaughts upon my inner life, depriving me of the ability to sustain inner stillness. The second event was the discovery that indifference to evil is worse than evil itself. Even the high worth of reflection in the cultivation of inner truth cannot justify remaining calm in the face of cruelties that make the hope of effectiveness of pure intellectual endeavors seem grotesque. Isolationism is frequently an unconscious pretext for carelessness, whether among statesmen or among scholars.

The third event that changed my attitude was my study of the prophets of ancient Israel, a study on which I worked for several years until its publication in 1962. From them I learned the niggardliness of our moral comprehension, the incapacity to sense the depth of misery caused by our own failures. It became quite clear to me that while our eyes are witness to the callousness and cruelty of man, our heart tries to obliterate the memories, to calm the nerves, and to silence our conscience.

There is immense silent agony in the world, and the task of man is to be a voice for the plundered poor, to prevent the desecration of the soul and the violation of our dream of honesty.

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.

**8. A.J. Heschel, "A Preface to an Understanding of Revelation," in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, 1996, pp. 186-190**

Revelation is a complex issue, presupposing first of all certain assumptions about the existence and nature of God, who communicates His will to man. Even granting the existence of a Supreme Power, modern man, with his aloofness to what God means, would find it preposterous to assume that the Infinite Spirit should come down to commune with the feeble, finite mind of man, that man could be an ear to God. With the concept of the Absolute so far removed from the grasp of his mind, man is, at best, bewildered at the claim of the prophets.

True, the claim of the prophets is staggering and almost incredible. But to us, living in this horribly beautiful world, God's thick silence is incomparably more staggering and totally incredible.

Is it historical curiosity that excites our interest in the problem of revelation? As an event of the past that subsequently affected the course of civilization, revelation would not engage the modern mind any more than the battle of Marathon or the Congress of Vienna. However, it concerns us not because of the impact it had upon past generations but as something which may or may not be of perpetual, unabating relevance. Thus, in entering this discourse, we do not conjure up the shadow of an archaic phenomenon but attempt to debate the question whether to believe that there is a voice in the world that pleads with man at all times or at some times in the name of God.

It is not only a personal issue. It one that concerns the history of all men from the beginning of time to the end of days. No one who has, at least once in his life, sensed the terrifying seriousness of human history or the earnestness of individual existence can afford to ignore that problem. He must decide, he must choose between yes and no.

Modern man used to think that the acceptance of revelation was an effrontery to the mind. Man must live by his intelligence alone; he is capable of both finding and attaining the aim of his existence. That man is not in need of superhuman authority or guidance was a major argument of the Deists against accepting the idea of prophecy. Social reforms, it was thought, would cure the ills and eliminate the evils from our world. Yet we have finally discovered what prophets and saints have always known: bread and beauty will not save humanity. There is a passion and drive for cruel deeds which only the fear of God can soothe; there is a suffocating sensuality in man which only holiness can ventilate.

How did Abraham arrive at his certainty that there is a God who is concerned with the world? Said Rabbi Isaac: Abraham may be compared to a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a *palace in flames*. "Is it possible that here is no one who cares for the palace?" He wondered. Until the owner of the building looked out and said, "I am the owner of the palace." Similarly, Abraham our father wondered, "Is it conceivable that the world is without a guide? The Holy One, blessed be He, looked out and said, "I am the Guide, the Sovereign of the world."

The world is in flames, consumed by evil. Is it possible that there is no one who cares?

The idea of revelation remains an absurdity as long as we are unable to comprehend the impact with which the reality of God is pursuing man. Yet at those moments in which the



fate of mankind is in the balance, even those who have never sensed how God turns to man suddenly realize that man — who has the power to devise both culture and crime, who is able to be a proxy for divine justice — is important enough to be the recipient of spiritual light at the rare dawns of his history.