

Presentation December 2018 for Limmud18 Birmingham, England
The Spiritual Humanism of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel
Compiled and edited by Peter A. Geffen

1. UNIQUENESS:

It is through the awareness that I am not only an everybody, that I evolve as a ...somebody, as a person, as something that cannot be repeated, for which there is no duplicate, no substitute.

It is in the awareness of my being somebody that freedom comes to pass.

2. PLURALISM:

A central concern in Jewish thinking is to overcome the tendency to see the world in one dimension, from one perspective, to reduce history exclusively to God's actions or to man's action, either to grace or to man's initiative. The marvelous and the mundane, the sacred and the secular, are not mutually exclusive, nor are the natural and the supernatural, the temporal and the eternal, kept apart. The heart of the relationship of God and man is reciprocity, interdependence. *The task is to humanize the sacred and to sanctify the secular.* (italics added)

3. EXPECTATION:

Over and above personal problems, there is an objective challenge to overcome inequity, injustice, helplessness, suffering, carelessness, oppression. Over and above the din of desires there is a calling, a demanding, a waiting, an expectation. There is a question that follows me wherever I turn. What is expected of me? What is demanded of me?

4. ENGAGEMENT, INTEGRATION & OPENNESS:

No religion is an Island. We are all involved with one another. Spiritual betrayal on the part of one of us effects the faith of all of us. Views adopted in one community have an impact on other communities. Today religious isolationism is a myth. For all the profound differences in perspective and substance, Judaism is sooner or later effected by the intellectual, moral and spiritual events within the Christian society, and vice versa.

5. UNIVERSALISM WITHIN PARTICULARISM:

We fail to realize that while different exponents of faith in the world of religion continue to be wary of the ecumenical movement, there is another ecumenical movement : nihilism. We must choose between inter-faith and inter-nihilism. Cynicism is not parochial. Should religions insist upon the illusion of complete isolation? Should we refuse to be on speaking terms with one another and hope for each other's failure? Or would we pray for each other's health, and help one another in preserving one's respective legacy, in preserving a common legacy?

6. SPIRITUALITY:

A religious man is a person who holds God and man in one thought at one time, at all times, who suffers in himself harms done to others, whose greatest passion is compassion, whose greatest strength is love and defiance of despair.

Our (religious) schools must do what non-religious schools have failed to accomplish: to convey to the student a sense for the marvel and mystery of being alive, a sense of indebtedness as well as a sense of significant being, an awareness of holiness in time, the capacity for celebration, the ability to hold God and man in one thought at one time.

The fate of mankind depends upon the realization that the distinction between good and evil, right and wrong, is superior to all other distinctions....To teach humanity the primacy of that distinction is of essence to the Biblical message.

To be is to stand for.

7. DIRECTION/HIGHER PURPOSE:

What is the ideal of religious education? One of its goals is to give norm, purpose, meaning, direction, and depth to what may be regarded as one of the ideals of general education, namely the fullest possible development of the individual.

(But) Personal meaning is meaningless, unless it is related to a transpersonal meaning. Thus religious education assumes that there are other goals besides that of the development of the individual, some of which are personal, while others point beyond personal existence.

It is a fatal illusion to assume that to be human is a fact given with human being rather than a goal and an achievement.

8. ETHICAL LIVING:

What we have learned from Jewish history is that if a man is not more than human then he is less than human. Judaism is an attempt to prove that in order to be a man, you have to be more than a man, that in order to be a people, we have to be more than a people. Israel was made to be a "holy people."

9. REACHING:

Being human (is) go(ing) beyond sheer continuity. Sheer continuity leads to the suspension of singularity, drudgery, inner devastation, demolition of all moments. To discover the hospitality of being, one must cultivate the art of reaching beyond oneself...In real life there is no ordinary, undistinguished man, unless man resigns himself to be drowned in indifference and commonness. Spiritual suicide is within everybody's reach.

10. CO-EXISTENCE:

For man to be means to be with other human beings. His existence is co-existence. He can never attain fulfillment, or sense meaning, unless it is shared, unless it pertains to other human beings.

11. AUTHENTICITY:

The authentic individual is neither an end nor a beginning but a link between ages, both memory and expectation. Every moment is a new beginning within a continuum of history. It is facetious to segregate a moment and not to sense its involvement in both past and future. Humbly the past defers to the future, but it refuses to be discarded. *Only he who is an heir is qualified to be a pioneer.* (italics added)

12. ACTIVISM:

"What message have you for young people?" asked Carl Stern of NBC in concluding a television interview with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel shortly before his death.

Rabbi Heschel replied: "...Let them remember that there is a meaning beyond absurdity. Let them be sure that every deed counts, that every word has power, and that we all can do our share to redeem the world in spite of all absurdities and all frustrations and all disappointments.

"And above all, (let them) remember...to build a life as if it were a work of art."

13. THE ROLE OF CLASSICAL TEXT

"Words are repositories of the spirit. It is only after we kindle a light in the words that we are able to behold the riches they contain. It is only after we arrive within a word that we become aware of the riches our own souls contain. The Bible is holiness in words...It is as if God took these Hebrew words and breathed into them of [God's] power, and the words became a live wire charged with [God's] spirit. To this very day, they are hyphens between heaven and earth. Concepts, words must not become screens; they must be regarded as windows. The word is but a clue; the real burden of understanding is upon the mind and soul of the reader. God is raging in the prophet's words. More than two thousand years of reading and research have not succeeded in exploring [the Bible's] full meaning."

Presentation December 2018 for Limmud18 Birmingham, England
The Spiritual Humanism of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel
Compiled and edited by Peter A. Geffen

14. WHAT IS THE BIBLE?

The Bible is holiness in words, (for in it) ...we hear (God's) voice."

It also contains words of human search and concern. There is in the Bible God's word to man, but there is also man's word to God and about Him: not only God's disclosure but man's insight.

"In the Torah, nothing is said about the books [the patriarchs] wrote or ideas they innovated. Instead, we are told tales of their adventures, their deeds, how they wandered from place to place to find food for their households, how they searched for brides, and so on, and their actions became Torah. Hence we learn the purpose of Jewish existence: we are obligated to live lives that will become Torah, lives that are Torah. The Bible is not a book about God; it is a book about man. The Bible is an unfinished drama." (Italics mine)

"No Idea can come about in a vacuum. **For a word of the Bible to happen it must permeate the soul, relate to one's problems, dreams, and emotions.** Detached from the living issues of the human situation, our commitment becomes dim, inane. In other words, to teach religion means to teach a way of dealing with living problems of human existence, with the problems of the student who sits in front of us. Otherwise it remains trivial. And religion cannot survive as a triviality."

15. UNDERSTANDING TORAH:

...it's acceptance should not be like setting up a talisman lock that seals both the mind and the conscience against the intrusion of new thoughts. Revelation is not vicarious thinking.

16. UNDERSTANDING HISTORY:

"What lends meaning to history? The promise of the future. If there is no promise, there is no meaningful history. Significance is contingent on vision and anticipation, on living the future in the present tense. (Italics mine) History may be described as an attempt to overcome the dividing line between past and present, as an attempt to see the past in the present tense. The Lord of history has always placed us in predicaments, and this seems to be part of our destiny, never to relax in complacency, but to face difficult tasks, to live by the challenge.

Genuine history is enshrined in our rituals. Yet, ritual, loyalty, theology, remain deficient unless there is an ongoing responsiveness to the outbursts and to the demands of immediate history, of our own situations. **The integrity of our lives is determined by seeing ourselves as part of the historic context in which we live...In order to be responsible, we must learn how to be responsive.** As an individual I discovered that I am a wave in the mysterious movement of Jewish history. We are still at the beginning of history. There is so much more in our souls than we have been able to utter. What providence holds in store for us surpasses the contributions made by our people in the ages bygone."

17. SOCIAL ACTIVISM- Tikkun Olam (Repair of the World)

"Judaism is the art of surpassing civilization. It teaches us how to help cure its ills. The world is repaired by outward acts of the soul. This is what the prophets discovered: History is a nightmare. There are more scandals, more acts of corruption, than are dreamed of in philosophy. It would be blasphemous to believe that what we witness is the end of God's creation. It is an act of evil to accept the state of evil as either inevitable or final. Others may be satisfied with improvement; the prophets insist upon redemption. The way man acts is a disgrace, and it must not go on forever.

18. Purpose:

The significance of Judaism, therefore, does not lie in its being conducive to the survival of this particular people but in its being a source of spiritual wealth, a source of meaning relevant to all peoples.

On Prayer

Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and to ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, falsehood. The liturgical movement must become a revolutionary movement, seeking to overthrow the forces that continue to destroy the promise, the hope, the vision.

"Righteousness and peace are interdependent" (Psalms 85:10) "The effect of righteousness will be peace, And the result of righteousness quietness and trust for ever." (Isaiah 32:17).

The prophet may be regarded as the first universal man in history; he is concerned with, and addresses himself to, all men. It was not an emperor but a prophet who first conceived of the unity of all men.

On Science

Science extends rather than limits the scope of the ineffable, and our radical amazement is enhanced rather than reduced by the advancement of knowledge. The theory of evolution and adaptation of the species does not disenchant the organism of its wonder...Scientific research is an entry into the endless, not a blind alley; solving one problem, a greater one enters our sight. One answer breeds a multitude of new questions; explanations are merely indications of greater puzzles. Everything hints at something that transcends it; the detail indicates the whole, the whole, its idea, the idea, its mysterious root. What appears to be a center is but a point on the periphery of another center. The totality of a thing is actual infinity. We are witnesses rather than authors of birth and death. We know that something animates and inspires a living organism. But what?...this world is so fantastically mysterious, so challengingly marvelous, that not to realize that there is more than I see, that there's endlessly more than I can express or even conceive, is just being underdeveloped intellectually. According to the Bible, the conquest of nature is a means to an end.

On Vietnam

The encounter of man and God is an encounter within the world. We meet within a situation of shared suffering, of shared responsibility. This is implied in believing in One God in whose eyes there is no dichotomy of here and there, of me and them. Oceans divide us, God's presence unites us, and God is present wherever man is afflicted, and all of humanity is embroiled in every agony wherever it may be. "Though I am not a native of Vietnam, ignorant of its language and traditions, I am involved in the plight of the Vietnamese.

On the poor

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.

Presentation December 2018 for Limmud18 Birmingham, England
The Spiritual Humanism of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel
Compiled and edited by Peter A. Geffen

On Teaching

...Everything depends on the person who stands in front of the classroom. The teacher is not an automatic fountain from which intellectual beverages may be obtained. He is either a witness or a stranger. To guide a pupil into the Promised Land, he must have been there himself. When asking himself: Do I stand for what I teach? Do I believe what I say? He must be able to answer in the affirmative.

What we need more than anything else is not textbooks but textpeople. It is the personality of the teacher which is the text that the pupils read; the text that they will never forget....he is...the creator of the future of our people. He must teach the pupils to evaluate the past in order to clarify their future.

FINALE

From the Diploma of The Abraham Joshua Heschel Middle School, quoting Rabbi Heschel:

“To be human is to be involved, to act and to react, to wonder and to respond....To live means to be at the crossroads. There are many forces and drives within the self. What direction to take is a question we face again and again. Who am I? A mere chip from the block of being? Am I not both the chisel and the marble? Being and foreseeing? Being and bringing into being?”