

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis 2
Class Notes 11/8/20

B. The Shoah and the Divine Pathos

I think the basis of Heschel's social activism is to be understood as a response to the Shoah ("disaster"), the Nazi genocide. Though he was able to escape, Heschel lost his mother and three sisters to the Nazis and never returned to Europe. He once wrote, "If I should go to Poland or Germany, every stone, every tree would remind me of contempt, hatred, murder, of children killed, of mothers burned alive, of human beings asphyxiated." As a Jew with a passionate faith in God, Heschel wrestled with the meaning of the Shoah for his understanding of God and the world. It was both a personal and theological catastrophe.

Heschel dedicated his landmark book *The Prophets* "To the martyrs of 1940-1945" and chose as an epigraph part of Psalm 44, which challenges God for having allowed evil to come on his people:

*All this has come upon us,
Though we have we not forgotten Thee,
Or been false to Thy covenant.
Our heart has not turned back,
Nor have our steps departed from Thy way...
...for thy sake we are slain...
Why dost Thou hide Thy face?*

Yet Heschel refused to give up his strong faith in God. He disputed with the "death of God" theologians who asked how anyone could believe in God after Auschwitz: "We died in Auschwitz, yet our faith survived. We know that to repudiate God would be to enhance the holocaust." For Heschel, to lose faith in God would be to open up the possibility of more holocausts. "Without God man is a lost soul, and it is in a lost soul that the demonic comes to life."

So having faith did not mean ignoring the evil in the world. In an essay from 1943 called "The Meaning of this War," Heschel acknowledged the reality of the demonic. "Emblazoned over the gates of the world in which we live is the escutcheon [insignia] of the demons." But he was not content to blame Satan. He saw the disaster as the result of our human lack of courage. "*Ashamed and dismayed, we ask: Who is responsible?...Let Fascism not serve as an alibi for our conscience. We have failed to fight for right, for justice, for goodness; as a result we must fight against wrong, against injustice, against evil. We have failed to offer sacrifices on the altar of peace; now we must offer sacrifices on the altar of war....Where were we when men learned to hate in the days of starvation? When raving madmen were sowing wrath in the hearts of the unemployed?* [Remember, Heschel was living in Europe in the 20s and 30s and saw firsthand the economic devastation created by the so-called "peace" treaty at the end of WWI]...*Tanks and planes cannot redeem humanity. The killing of snakes will save us for the moment but not forever. The war will outlast the victory of arms if we fail to conquer the infamy of the soul: the*

indifference to crime, when committed against others.” He goes on to support his argument with a quote from the Baal Shem Tov, the 18th cent. founder of Hasidic Judaism: *“But all may be guided by the words of the Baal Shem: ‘If a man has beheld evil, he may know that it was shown to him in order to learn his own guilt and repent; for what is shown to him is also within him.’”* Heschel refuses the comfort of blaming others for the Holocaust.

Heschel embraces what we have also seen in Rabbi Sacks: radical responsibility. His most well-known statement is, **“Some are guilty, but all are responsible.”** We saw a version of this idea when we looked at the passage from Deuteronomy 21;1-9 about a person found murdered outside a city. The elders of the city must offer a sacrifice of atonement for the sin, even though they were not guilty of the crime. The Talmud argues that they do share some responsibility, since they may have failed to provide a safe shelter for the stranger. Biblically, the whole community bears some responsibility for the sin in its midst, even though individuals are guilty of the sin itself. The point is not to engage in fingerpointing at others but rather ask, “What is my responsibility for this situation? What do I need to do?”