

Judaism as a Prism
Excavating Heschel's *Refracted* Torah

Eitan Freedenberg

"I want to know how God created this world. I am not interested in this or that phenomenon, in the spectrum of this or that element. I want to know His thoughts; the rest are details."

- Albert Einstein

The Ineffable Ideas of Abraham Joshua Heschel

"Heschel" – speak the name and you evoke many different men. The philosopher Heschel, the father Heschel, the civil rights activist Heschel, the poet Heschel, the Heschel who lived his life with true moral grandeur and spiritual audacity. In many ways, the romantic notions attached to the man have, over time, overshadowed his most fundamental and profound identity: rabbi. In texts such as *Man is Not Alone* and *God in Search of Man*, Heschel excavated and mapped out the essence and aura of divine understanding, forging a powerful new bond between the Jewish human and the theological identity and truths that lie as the backbone of the faith. The works are remarkable for their passion and their commitment to expanding the consciousness and self of each Jew through reconciliation with the beauty of the ineffable existence of God. Despite their emotional brilliance and their direct challenge to the notion that we cannot personally experience God within the realm of human interaction, they're largely sentimentalist texts, committed mostly to promoting a simple – albeit profound – phenomenology of religion. In calling attention to the mystical dimension of religion, and Judaism specifically, Heschel basically ignores the terrestrial transmission of Jewish ideas, knowledge, and identity, focusing instead on a conceptual framework grounded in faith and "spirituality." These texts are not of

our primary concern here, and will be set aside in the proceeding excavation of Heschel's historical-religious ideology.

Heschel's most pure rabbinic text, and indeed his most complete survey of the history and context of Jewish knowledge, is his 1962 masterwork *Torah Min HaShamayim*, or *Heavenly Torah*. According to Susannah Heschel, the book is "not merely another tome, nor [is] it a conventional work of scholarship. Rather, it [is] a *sefer*, a work of religious inspiration that was intended not only for scholars of rabbinic Judaism but also for Jews seeking theological guidance" (Heschel xvii). The text explores the views of the rabbis in the Mishnah, Talmud and Midrash about the nature of Torah, the revelation of God to mankind, prophecy, and the ways that Jews have used scriptural exegesis to expand and understand these core Jewish texts. *Heavenly Torah* (as it shall be referred to henceforth), is written as a purely religious text, in the vein of his Hasidic ancestors and mentors – including his ambitious teacher, David Koigen – which shapes previous religious sources (The Talmud, *Otar Midrashim*, etc.) into a cohesive apparatus through which previously concealed views on God, revelation, the nature of interpretation, and pluralistic religion could be revealed. This is, indeed, where Heschel's notion of the prism of Jewish thought arises. The subtitle of *Heavenly Torah* is "b'aspaklaria shel ha'dorot" – *As Refracted Through the Generations* – and the text goes to great lengths to present the notion that the transmission of Torah (both written and oral) has been, primarily, via the process of refraction. We seek herein to give a complete account of Heschel's concept of refraction; how does it

differ from reflection or a nominally “direct” transmission? Is a refracted transmission merely a facet of a quintessentially Jewish epistemological framework, or is that framework, conversely, a product of a long-standing tradition of refraction? To Heschel, it seems, refraction of the Torah’s ideals and teachings over time is fully akin to the optometric process through which a prism bends light and emits the beam as a wide spectrum of visible light; in presenting the conflicting tendencies of the ancient rabbinical schools of thought as a template that has been replicated throughout the latter centuries of Biblical exegesis and theological excavation, Heschel demonstrates that the relentless search for revised Jewish knowledge in the fixed text of the Torah – which will be proven here to be the analogue to the optometric bending of light – opens the doors to perception and reception. Though he rarely refers to the “refraction” concept by name, his allusions to the remarkable process confer a broad relevance to his historical-critical claims, while additionally bolstering his notion that the world of Jewish thought is permeated by a recurrent theme of intellectual struggle – in the midst of which, intellectual progress becomes a back and forth process, pushed off a straight bearing by various refracting agents – as well as philosophical and scientific-logical triumph.

Heschel: A Man in Search of God

The focus of Heschel’s *Heavenly Torah* is the competing ideological camps of revered Rabbis Akiva and Ishmael, but understanding Heschel himself is

integral to the process of excavating his analytical method and his nominal claims. Briefly, Rabbi Heschel was one of – if not *the* – transcendent, prolific theologians of the 20th Century. Born in Warsaw to a family that, according to the Jewish Theological Seminary, “traced its ancestry back to the circle around the Baal Shem, the founder of Hasidism,” Abraham Heschel was educated in “the best of the Eastern European yeshiva tradition and at the University of Berlin.” Heschel left Poland shortly before World War II to become a teacher at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, but left due to his distaste for the *nouveau* ideology of the Reform movement. Seeking an academic institution where “critical, modern scholarship of the Bible was allowed, and... Jewish law was normative,” he discovered the Jewish Theological Seminary – the epicenter of Conservative Jewish thought in America – to be, more or less, his intellectual home. He rose to prominence in the 1950’s and 60’s as the Professor of Ethics and Mysticism at the Seminary, where he taught until his death.

This is a mere snapshot of a man who devoted his life to countless passions, among them global civil rights, medieval Jewish philosophy, Kabbalah, the structure of prophecy, and Hasidism. Heschel’s scholarship established him as an intense luminary within the inner circle of the Seminary. Obsessed, like Buber was, with the relationship man was to have with God, he attracted followers who were likewise “more interested in spirituality than critical text study, which was a specialty of scholars at JTS.” As a teacher, he abandoned himself unblushingly to the pursuit of his deep theological ideas, with the

express intent of introducing the Jewish people with the ineffable experience of relating to God and the inexhaustible, esoteric strata of what he terms the “mystical reality” of the Torah. Readings of his most accomplished philosophical and theological texts reveal a writer, poet, and rabbi consumed with the conceptual symbology (real and intangible) of the vast Jewish experience vis-à-vis rituals, halakha, philosophizing, and personal revelation, which he believed every Jew was capable of achieving. Needless to say, these attitudes and interests set him apart from the rest of the staff at the Seminary, who did not find his works unworthy of attention but merely abstruse and marginal to the extensive exegetical research and liturgical training underway in all other academic divisions of the school.

Time has looked favorably upon Rabbi Heschel; the “moral grandeur and spiritual audacity” that he demonstrated as a professor and theologian is now revered as the zenith of ethical and mystical academia. In an elegy on the late rabbi’s life, Rabbi Reuven Kimmelman explained, “when Heschel spoke, people sensed a vibrant, incarnated tradition. He never had to make forced connections with Judaism; he was the connection. To hear him in an address echoing the perspectives of Moses, Hillel, Saadyah, and the Ari was to witness a three thousand year tradition rolled up into one soul. He once declared that ‘the ultimate meaning of existence is to be a religious witness.’ By this he meant ‘compassion for God, reverence for man, celebration of holiness in time, sensitivity to the mystery of being a Jew, sensitivity to the presence of God in the

Bible.” It is with this in mind – this remarkable ability to act as the conductor through which the energy of mystical rabbinic understanding flowed; and as the unifier of the methodical rabbinic tradition with the form of progressive, modernist exegesis that gained inestimable relevance within the Seminary – that we can begin to excavate the metaphysical and teleological implications of refracted Torah; it no doubt makes sense for the sensualist Heschel to articulate his informed rabbinic worldview through a notion so affected and so visually arresting as a refraction – we are inspired instantly to think of a prism, with a singular light (the Torah) transforming into a vast spectrum – but does the paradigm truly apply for all aspects of Jewish knowledge? What acts as the prism through which the Heavenly Torah is refracted? What parts of the Torah, if any, are lost as reflected light? And finally, what is the final tangible or intangible structure of the refracted Torah?

The Multi-Directional Expansion of Prophecy and Text

To satisfy the nominal implications of “refraction,” *Torah* – and the constituent parts therein – must start at a single point and expand into a vast array of wavelengths. Heschel identifies that single point as the experience on Sinai. In elucidating the so-called “maximalist” and “minimalist” approaches to the exegesis of Torah as a whole, holistic text-idea, Heschel builds his case that pursuing the human element of the Torah experience – starting with Moses’ receipt of the Torah on Sinai and following through millennia of rabbis and

scholars expanding and contracting the Torah to its most wide-ranging and microcosmic implications – will be the key to a comprehensive study of the Torah culture as a whole. Although this stands in sharp contrast to the maximalist view – i.e., that the whole Torah, including the Written and Oral parts, was received at Sinai, and no human analysis or exegesis is capable of effectively expanding the text into something legitimately *new* – Heschel seeks to find a compromise wherein the keen rabbinic tradition surrounding maximalism (specifically from the school of Rabbi Akiva) is not merely negotiated away to appease the modern humanist, Wellhausen-inspired approach to Torah, namely that the Jewish people have played a large role in refining and redefining the role of Torah within various socio-historic contexts and to satisfy divergent theological claims. For those who take the minimalist view, explains translator Gordon Tucker, “Moses became a paradigm for future generations,” in that aggadic depictions of him affirm that he asserted his unique human input – God spoke the word of the Torah to Moses, but Moses himself acted in physically writing it – and innovated. Maximalists, on the other hand, view Moses as “pinnacle rather than paradigm”; Heschel contends that for such scholars, human fulfillment comes from recognizing the divine hand that wrote *through* Moses, and from “using powers of interpretation not to innovate but rather to maintain and defend the Torah’s supernatural character and power.”¹ It is not clear yet if the maximalist approach stands in deep contrast to the notion of

¹ Heschel 553

refraction. Certainly, the Akivan school believed in interpretation, but in asserting through their exegetical methodology the belief that 1) the Torah was received as a single, unified totality and 2) that human interaction with Torah has had implications for humanity but *not* for Torah itself, we are left, at least initially, to the impression that a maximalist would view refraction as a threat to the notion that Torah is an eternally conserved quantity, capable of continuous transmission of its own structure even as it passes through various media. Heschel, however, does not seek to discredit either minimalism or maximalism, and as such the thrust of his historical study here becomes the fusion of both approaches with the notion of refracted Torah.

Heschel goes to great lengths to demonstrate that regardless of its insistence that the *Torah* could not expand over time, the maximalist viewpoint itself expanded greatly over time. He quotes Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish, who “comes and teaches that not only did Moses receive all the commandments and their interpretations, but also all words of prophecy, as well as the Mishna and Talmud.”² Heschel additionally culls numerous rabbinic sources, such as Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah, that seem to suggest that rabbis from various eras propagated the maximalist viewpoint. But this historical analysis is a stretch, and even Heschel himself realizes it; despite various selections from Maimonides’ Mishna Torah that show Maimonides to be a supporter of the notion that “all the commandments that were given to Moses at Sinai were given with their

² Heschel 563

explanations,"³ Heschel crumbles in the face of rabbinic reality. Maimonides deviates from the approach of ben Lakish, Heschel explains, "in that he says that Rav Ashi compiled in the Gemara 'statutes and latent rules that were not received from Moses and that contemporary courts derived' ...in every generation new matters of law were added" that, according to Heschel, were not learned from the chain of tradition (a deviation from maximalism to begin with, as there is no room in such an approach for tradition to factor into the chain of transmission) but rather from the modes of exegesis.⁴ The key moment in his discussion of the maximalist strain, however, comes later, as he is beginning to approach the history and context of the Ishamelian minimalism. Heschel writes, "In adopting the minimalist approach, Maimonides holds that 'every commandment that the Holy and Blessed One gave to Moses our master, peace be upon him, was given with an explanation... but that which was not heard explicitly from the prophet among the many matters that branch off from those original commandments, were derived by logic and by the...modes of reasoning that were given at Mount Sinai and are applicable to the Torah'"⁵ This sharp juxtaposition of early Maimonidean view and later Maimonidean view gives us a sense of the profound historiographical appeal of minimalism; by quoting from the Mishna Torah, a profound and trenchantly respected text by the medieval world's greatest Jewish thinker, Heschel shows that maximalism is perhaps a

³ Rambam, Introduction to the Commentary on the Mishna

⁴ Heschel 560

⁵ *ibid.*

primitive explanation of the transmission of Torah from generation to generation – Maimonides goes so far as to experiment with its theological and sociological implications, but he never fully subscribes to it and later rejects it. In portraying this dramatic shift, Heschel effectively and importantly singles ben Lakish out as the promoter of a rather understaffed ideology.

Nevertheless, Heschel does not present the dual approach merely to dismiss one of them as historically inaccurate and meaningless; in fact, the relative lack of support for maximalism is, in Heschel's mind, what makes it such a fascinating ideological phenomenon. Emphasizing that over the generations, a broader concept of "Torah from heaven" prevailed, Heschel nevertheless bestows great confidence on the intellectual tradition supporting maximalism; although few scholars truly believe that the entire text-idea of Torah was distributed on Sinai, there is a preponderance of rabbinic literature about the unity of the content of the Torah. Digging deep into aggadic tradition, Heschel uncovers various aggadot that speak to the importance of maintaining the physical and metaphysical unity of each and every Torah scroll by giving each letter special significance. One such aggada explains, "See how by switching the tips of the litters you can destroy the world. By turning a *het* into a *hei*, you change 'we set our hope on the Lord' to 'we smite the Lord' (Psalm 33:20); by turning a *hei* into a *het*, you change 'Let all that breathes praise the Lord' to 'Let all that breathes desecrate the Lord' (Psalm 150:6)."⁶ From this aggada, and from

⁶ BT Kiddushin 32a

Heschel's deliberate placement of it in his composition on maximalism, we can infer that if the maximalist view is to be an element of the refracted Torah ideal, then refraction should not include textual changes – for, as Rabbenu Nissim bar Yakov writes, “a person should not be careless with even a single letter of the Torah, for every letter contains numerous allusions”⁷ – lest we lose ourselves in an inconsistent portrayal of the perfect source material. While never promoting the maximalist tradition *over* the minimalist, Heschel nonetheless recognizes that an excessively lenient minimalist approach could potentially pose a serious threat to the physical text of the Torah. Clearly it is not to be altered, watered down, or dissected and reassembled like a Burroughs novel; with this in mind, Heschel's “refracted” Torah is Torah that is touched and interpreted but never scrambled or obscured.

The significance of the maximalist approach is that despite its relative unpopularity, it intrigued many sages and eventually informed their minimalism; Heschel plots a careful line between the two and demonstrates that although they don't technically coexist, each one affirms the sacredness of the Torah and positions it within the hands of man to merely observe or actively manipulate. In this sense, minimalism and maximalism act as refracting agents in equal measure with their constituent principles. Clearly, the exegetical methodology that minimalists promote is a prism in and of itself: taking in the singular light of the Torah, minimalist sages expanded the Torah in all directions,

⁷ Hibbur Yafeh Meha-yeshua, p. 89

emphasizing that Torah held within it “more than what was spoken to Moses at Sinai.”⁸ But the interaction of the two schools of thought is presented by Heschel as a dialectic—“it was the deep veneration that was felt for the thought of Rabbi Akiva, the father of the maximalist approach, that itself moved Amoraim to articulate the minimalist approach to the prophecy of Moses our Master.”⁹

Heschel even ventures to suggest that minimalist sages believed that “things not revealed to Moses were revealed to Rabbi Akiva”¹⁰ The irony of this merely adds to the charm and profundity of the relationship between these two schools of thought; by deliberately excising any evidence of sages taking the middle ground in their approach to the unity and manipulability of the text, Heschel gives a profound illustration of two starkly different schools throwing the idea of Torah back and forth throughout the ages. In optics, “refraction occurs when light waves travel from a medium with a given refractive index to a medium with another. At the boundary between the media, the wave's phase velocity is altered, it changes direction, and its wavelength increases or decreases but its frequency remains constant.” Applying this scientific account to Heschel’s historical-critical examination of maximalism and minimalism, it is evident that the two approaches are simply different media with distinctive refractive indices unto themselves—figuratively speaking, maximalism speeds up the refraction of the Torah by quickly “bouncing” it back in its complete form, and minimalism

⁸ Heschel 571

⁹ Heschel 576

¹⁰ *ibid.*

slows it down by absorbing its light and changing its wavelength through interpretation and avid analytical manipulation. Through this entire process, however, the “frequency” of the Torah does not change – which we can take here to perhaps mean that it maintains its underlying metaphysical unity and its physical textual immutability.

Minimal Text Sparks Maximal Thought

It’s certainly a pleasant notion that maximalism and minimalism can coexist as long as they both perform respective functions as media, refracting the singular light of the Torah into a fascinating array of viewpoints, and Heschel no doubt intends in *Heavenly Torah* to promote both of them as essential and complementary viewpoints that have done nothing but enrich our understanding of the Torah (text and concept) as a whole. But in accepting both and closing the book, we effectively neglect Heschel’s *own* school of thought in the interests of appeasing ourselves; the maximalist approach is only presented as agreeable because we know that – although Heschel does not explicitly state it – in the annals of sagely texts, the minimalist approach is far more favorable, and the maximalist poses no considerable threat to our modern viewpoint. The entire realm of aggada, as well as the Biblical commentary by luminaries such as Rashi and Onkelos is largely anecdotal and relies on its readers to create within their heads an imaginary parallel existence for the Torah, in which events

occurred differently or characters have intentions detached from the stark text itself but profoundly supported by keen analysis.

The entire business of modern conservative rabbinics (and, in many ways, the rabbinical method of all strains of modern Judaism) has overwhelmingly relied on its followers' belief that the text has an extensive range of meaning, and that we can isolate the wavelength of each meaning and derive from it our own theological and liturgical conclusions. The very fact that Heschel wrote this text about the multitude of manners in which the Torah has been received and exegetically examined suggests that he believes firmly in the view of Rabbi Jonathan Eibenschutz in that "Moses received only generalities... and the Sages, of blessed memory, brought all the details of [these generalities] to light."¹¹ It's entirely conceivable, Heschel asserts, that Moses received the *methodology* for exegeting the text (ergo, implying that the Torah was given as a complete package by God during the revelation on Mount Sinai) but anything that would be derived through such a methodology remained dormant in the Torah, waiting to be uncovered. In explaining Rabbi Isaac's declaration that "it was not just all the prophets who received their prophecy at Sinai, but even the Sages who arise in every generation... all of them received their share from Sinai," Heschel explains that our continuous reconstruction of the Sinai experience stems from our desire to understand the secrets of cognitive apprehension and "to

¹¹ Eibenschutz 29

understand the source of knowledge, and knowledge of Torah in particular."¹²

The epistemic process of thought is constantly evolving, he contends, and thought *itself* expands continually; "Sages say things that they did not hear from their masters," Heschel clarifies, "they construct narratives and they innovate halakhot."¹³ Thus, it seems that Heschel finds a rather suitable compromise between the maximalist approach and the minimalist approach by simultaneously mining maximalism for its sentimental attachment to the Sinai experience and discarding the rest of the ideology in favor of the more modernist, approachable, flexible method that puts Torah in our own hands.

Earlier we considered whether or not Heschel views minimalism as a refracting prism in and of itself; because of his emphasis on the minimalist sages' interest in expanding the singular Torah into an arrayed Torah replete with extensive viewpoints that are considered intrinsic constituents of the Torah itself, it was simple to conclude that minimalism is, in fact, a refractor of the Torah. But now we must consider maximalism: despite its otiose and one-dimensional interpretation of the Torah-form, could it also be a refractor? Could we have two refractors working simultaneously on the Torah? In Heschel's worldview, the maximalist approach is, in fact, invalid as a refractor of Torah and is, as such, an imperfect and inconsistent medium for the successful transmission of Torah ideals. Heschel scholar John Merkle contends that, in his subject's view, "the Bible should be read, studied, and interpreted not just as an antiquarian

¹² Heschel 585

¹³ *ibid.*

document but as the record of revelation, can again become a voice vibrating across the corridors of time, recalling us to the divine demand, and challenging us to take a stand as responsive and responsible persons... The Bible is not a book to be read but a drama in which to participate.”¹⁴ Philosophically speaking, Heschel’s beliefs stand at great odds with the notion of a singular, unaffected, and stagnant text acting as the medium through which the ideals of Judaism (expressed *qua* the notion of Torah) are transferred from one generation to the next. For example, in his lengthy compositions on the nature of revelation, Heschel affirms that the revelation of God, expressed through the words of Scripture, was mediated through events that happened in the past—i.e., the revelations that we can have, in terms of scriptural study, are revelations of God’s interaction with man (and the Jews, in particular) throughout history, as opposed to awesome revelations of God’s “true self.”¹⁵ Indeed, he directs one of the major lectures in *God in Search of Man* against religions and philosophies that have “contempt for time”¹⁶ and which devalue the category of the individual and unique. It’s not surprising, then, that Heschel put such great emphasis on the aggadic dimension of the Bible, claiming that “the interrelationship of halacha and aggada is the very heart of Judaism. Halacha without aggada is dead, aggada without halacha is wild.”¹⁷ To emphasize the aggadic is to deny the maximalist approach; though Heschel and a maximalist like ben Lakish share the

¹⁴ Merkle 54

¹⁵ Merkle 55

¹⁶ Heschel 1955, p205

¹⁷ *ibid.*

profound sentiment of the massive and humbling revelation on Sinai, Heschel ultimately finds the human element of Torah inescapably extant. The covenant established at Sinai, he contends, introduced man's input into the central ideas of the religion, which undoubtedly include those found in the Torah. "Sinai," Heschel explains, "initiated a new relationship between God and man: God became engaged to a people. Israel accepted the new relationship; it became engaged to God. It was an event to which both were partners. God gave His word to Israel, and Israel gave its word of honor to God."¹⁸ Indeed, in his religious philosophy, one of the major themes is God's need for man's cooperation and interaction in the shaping of the world. This no doubt extends to the writing of the Torah; invariably, Heschel's "deep theology" and phenomenological philosophy focus on the inalienable right of every human to interact with God on spiritual and performative levels. To interact with God, we must, conceivably, interact with the text; and, to interact with the text, we must interpret and expand it without the limitations of a maximalist approach. Just as our relationship with God should and will transcend the "box," so too must our relationship with the text.

For these reasons, it would be exceedingly difficult to contend that the maximalist approach constitutes a prism; it is certainly not an opaque viewpoint, as the Torah does pass through it unobstructed, but for our intents we must label it as a simply transparent medium, as opposed to one that truly enriches our

¹⁸ Heschel 1955, p.214

viewpoint. Receiving the Torah continuously via a maximalist methodology still constitutes a valid reading of the text in and of itself, but we read the text as it *was* – stagnant, and fossilized in a single moment in time – and not as it could be. This is clearly a concern for Heschel. Translator Gordon Tucker raises a fascinating issue: “Is the Torah that we have in our possession – whose unity we associate with the unity of God’s will – an adequate expression of that divine will?”¹⁹ In the face of the Christian challenge to the eternal validity of the Sinai covenant, it has clearly remained important over time to maintain the immutability of the Torah and its laws; on the other hand, how could a document written in human language possibly capture the fullness of an infinite will? Indeed, Heschel’s refracting prism enters into our language in answering this question too; he raises the notion that the Torah itself, for all its sanctity, “is a mere surrogate for Wisdom itself”²⁰ – the mind of God, as it were. Applying the minimalist approach to this teaching, it is evident that Heschel believed the Torah to be a complete expression of God’s wisdom, albeit separated into individuated spectral components. Thus, the pure, singular instantiation of God’s wisdom (or will) can be understood as the beam of light – already possessive of the myriad frequencies that hitherto become the spectral array – and the Torah is the manmade device that separates the beam into discernible light but, due to its limitations as a product of human hands, it is unable to fully represent to the viewer the complete spectrum; the figurative “ultra-violet, x-ray,

¹⁹ Heschel 680

²⁰ Heschel 681

and gamma rays” are imperceptible to us, as Heschel explains – “it is impossible for all of God’s wisdom to be transmitted to mortals.”²¹ The Torah, or the prism, is a perfect *vessel*, but its physical shortcomings render it incapable of expressing every wavelength to its human audience. In his concluding chapters, Heschel seems to endorse the notion that Moses received the Torah at Sinai, but it was not the entire Torah (this is different from minimalism, since it still retains the basic notion that the Torah was given in its most “giveable” format, i.e. the most that humans could ascertain and nothing more). With the completion of the revelation on Sinai, Heschel contends, “a door closed”²² – but, indeed, the Torah that a person learns in *this* world is “vacuous compared to the Torah of the Messiah.”²³ Perhaps in the days of the Messiah, the Torah will be a prism made not by man, but by a more perfect, self-actualized creature possessing the ability to create a vessel capable of refracting the same single beam of light into fully viewable complete spectrum. Heschel quotes R. Nahman of Bratzlav and lets the following stand on its own: “After this final exile will come the true revelation of the Torah.”²⁴

“Both These and These are the *Living* Words of God”

It is not surprising that Heschel – a deeply spiritual man with a profound concern for the Jew’s phenomenological encounters with the ineffable (God) and

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *ibid.*

²³ Heschel 682

²⁴ Likkut Etzot Ha-Meshelash, “Awe and Service,” 116

the effable (the text of the Torah) – would innovate an idea so useful to the study of Torah as the notion of the text as a refractor. For one, it allows us to approach the Torah not merely as a book or as an idea, but as a fully actualized text-concept, with implications as microscopic as those surrounding Moses' encounter with God, who was sewing the crowns onto the tops of each individual letter of the Torah, and as macroscopic as the function of TORAH as a formal concept, transcending its role as merely a document. To the extent that it is possible, Heschel appears committed in *Heavenly Torah* to tackling the problem of how the various theological strands of the rabbinic tradition can be recombined into a unified, though complex, view of revealed religion. Throughout the text, which has only been touched upon here, he asks of himself and his readers to undertake an explication of how the humanist/rationalist/transcendent stance of the minimalist Ishamaelians and the supernatural/spiritual stance of the maximalist Akivans could be merged in a meaningful and coherent way. Beginning with the recognition that there is a natural tendency among many to reject the idea of joining opposites. Could it be possible that these two views, which seem to exclude one another, could both have an intrinsic, divine authentication? In what sounds like a bit of condescension, Heschel begins the final stretch of his work by referring to "adherents of plain meaning,"²⁵ by which he likely means maximalists, but, taken as a whole, means those who take an overly logical, linear view of religious

²⁵ Heschel 702

thought. Exasperated, he asks, “How can Torah be learned in this way?” and, indeed, the Jewish theological circles in which Heschel found himself – notably, the Jewish Theological Seminary, where the culture of exegesis and reinterpretation dominated the religious and academic scene – grappled frequently with this issue. Heschel even quotes Elijah from his speech to the Israelites on Mount Carmel: “How long will you continue to hop between two boughs!”²⁶ Essentially, choose your religious stance; either affirm a humanist/historical/minimalist stance, or a supernatural validation of the Torah as God’s perfect word instituted within a perfectly constructed vessel. Nevertheless, Heschel bravely rises to the challenge of answering those who negate the possibility of holding simultaneously incongruent theological beliefs and views regarding the existential nature of The Torah and Torah in its other forms. Heschel understood, and rightly so, that in studying the human and divine nature of the text we must insist on honoring the ineffable complexity inherent in all religious faith; in this sense, his exhaustive safari of rabbinic literature is a paean to the untouchable appeal of dualism, and the appeal of the dualist dialectic manifesting itself vis-à-vis a refractor.

Heschel is adamant in his defense of the refraction of Jewish thought via the prism of the Torah – even in the very last stretches of *Heavenly Torah* he evokes again and again the image of oscillation, of the light of Torah bending as it is absorbed and bounced away by different media. “The pillars of their faith

²⁶ *ibid.*

need not fail," he explains, "as it is impossible to have a living Torah without the struggle of opposites, without disputes, without the many permutations of ideas and outlooks."²⁷ Heschel quotes from the work of Rabbi Meir ibn Gabbi to make the point clear and profound:

All flows from the same source, and in it are always opposite facets, and these give rise to the divergences and oppositions that cause fluctuation between impure and pure, forbidden and permitted, unfit and fit, as it is known to those of discerning hearts. And the great voice without end draws from and comes forth from that source, and it is composed of all the fluctuating facets, leaving nothing out. With this great power, each thing shares in its opposing aspects...that is the 'sea' in which all is united and in which unity is again established.²⁸

The implication could not be more sublime or more lucid: the Jewish people is that sea, we are the receivers of the entire spectrum emitted by that great power. The source is singular, and the opposing facets do not change the content of the flow – they merely change its direction and, in doing so, illuminate and enhance its power and significance. Whoever contends that these various approaches contradict one another is simply mistaken, as both are focused on a *single* reality, and each is subsumed by the other. Heschel's conclusion on this matter is astonishing in its utterly simple beauty, but also very telling: "The hidden essence of reality is that of two natures coming together. They are both embedded in the human mind, competing with one another, struggling to

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ Heschel 708

emerge. And just as it is with reality itself, so it is with Torah... God created ideas Janus-like, in complements; what is sought is one, but the paths to it are two. Two modes of thought, vision and reason, appear to us as separate and distinct, vying and competing with each other... both share the same crown. One who stands outside sees an infringement of domains; one who stands within sees a blending of domains."²⁹ We are born ready, as intellectual beings and as beings stamped by the influence of Torah, to engage ourselves in the great dialectic of yore and, as such, it is necessary to shift viewpoints from time to time in order to see the fullness of reality. One must move from domain to domain, as light inside a refractor does, not with the purpose of estranging oneself from the other, but rather, in Heschel's words, to "achieve fullness of vision."³⁰ The entire community benefits from the prismatic nature of Torah; disagreements between the Sages bend the light but do not distort it, and thus we receive it in whole, inflected by the evolution of correlated thought; to illustrate, this is the conceptual equivalent of a page of Torah or Talmud with the p'shat in the center and the drash along the edges. Heschel concludes by saying that our age "demands the [minimalist] teachings of Rabbi Ishmael,"³¹ but in doing so he succeeds in validating Akiva as well, as the Ishmaelian ideology encourages us to accept the multitude of viewpoints available at the terminus of the great prism. Our reading of the Torah acts as a second refractor, refocusing the visible

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ Heschel 710

spectrum onto our retinas and into the eye of our souls. To the list of Heschels I provided at the outset of this exercise, add Heschel the prophet – perhaps the most profound redactor and unifier of the Torah in our time.

Bibliography

Chester, Michael A. Divine Pathos and Human Being. London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2005.

Dresner, Samuel H. Heschel, Hasidism, and Halakha. New York: Fordham UP, 2002.

Heschel, Abraham J. Between God and Man; an Interpretation of Judaism. Comp. Fritz A. Rothschild. New York: New York Free P, 1959.

Heschel, Abraham J. God in Search of Man: a Philosophy of Judaism. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955.

Heschel, Abraham J. Heavenly Torah: as Refracted Through the Generations. Trans. Gordon Tucker. New York, NY: Continuum, 2005.

Heschel, Abraham J. Maimonides. New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1935.

Heschel, Abraham J. Man's Quest for God; Studies in Prayer and Symbolism. New York: Scribner, 1956.

Heschel, Abraham J. Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays. Ed. Susannah Heschel. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996.

Heschel, Abraham J. The Circle of the Baal Shem Tov. Chicago: University of Chicago P, 1985.

Merkle, John C., ed. Abraham Joshua Heschel: Exploring His Life and Thought.

London: Collier Macmillan, 1985.