
Abraham Joshua Heschel's Critique of Modern Society

Rabbi Dr. Einat Ramon
Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies
(Former Dean of Schechter Rabbinical Seminary)¹

A. INTRODUCTION:

According to Heschel, the world of the Enlightenment had deceived humanity and betrayed God. While offering humanity promises of equality, justice and the superficial supplying of material goods, it had produced exceedingly more violence, bloodshed and degradation of human dignity than any other culture, all in the name of many noble causes.

Heschel believed that despite the imperfections of the vanished Jewish civilization of pre-Holocaust, pre-communist Eastern European Jewry, of which, as we shall see, he was quite aware, it had contained a unique spiritual and moral voice. If we modern, post-Holocaust Jews, dare to follow it, we would, according to Heschel, save Judaism and humanity.

My comments in the following paper will be based primarily on two essays, written by Heschel in the late nineteen-forties: *The Earth is the Lord's* (1950, first delivered as a speech in YIVO in 1945 and published in Yiddish a year later, in 1946, under the name "Der Mizrakh-Eyuropeisher Yid" and *Pikuach Neshamah*, published in Hebrew in 1949.² Both essays responded to the two major events in recent twentieth century Jewish history: the *Shoah* and establishment of the State of Israel. The languages in which he wrote them, Yiddish and Hebrew, indicated that they were directed at those coming from a background similar to his own, Eastern European, post- Holocaust Jews who migrated to America. Both are, therefore, indicative of Heschel's own soul searching as a witness to the vanished Eastern European Jewry, who had survived the its unimagined, abrupt destruction, a generation disillusioned by the Enlightenment, that nevertheless held the key to the continuity of Judaism in the next generation. One might further argue that these two essays, written only a number of years following his arrival in the U.S. in the 1940s, following his physical, and one might argue also ideological transition from HUC to JTS,³ serve as a blueprint for much of his later theological-educational agenda in North America.

1 This article is dedicated to Rabbi Professor Ismar Schorsch, sixth Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

2 I wish to thank Professor Emeritus Avraham Shapira of Tel Aviv University for bringing "Pikuach Neshamah" to my attention, for providing me a copy of its original copy in Hebrew.

3 Edward K. Kaplan, *Spiritual Radical: Abraham Joshua Heschel in America 1940-1972*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2007 pp.59- 65.

In the following pages, I examine the details of Heschel's critique of modern society in general and of modern Diasporic Jewish society in particular in these two essays. I highlight his call to members of his generation to bring the spiritual world of their childhood back to life and rekindle the light of Eastern European Jewry, as they are the last generation of witnesses to that world. In the third section of this essay I wish to demonstrate how he employs "theological/spiritual portraits" of Eastern European Jews as role models for a post-Holocaust Judaism. While much in the political reorganization of the post Cold War Western society has changed, I shall argue that perhaps only under our current circumstances of a globalized consumerist society can we better appreciate Heschel's educational agenda. Furthermore, it seems that many of the ideas later developed in his thought in the 1950s and 1960s are encapsulated in these two essays that he wrote at a major juncture in his life and in the history of the Jewish People.

B. THE ESSENCE OF MODERN WESTERN CULTURE

How did Heschel characterize the modern world? His words in *Pikuach Neshamah* are quite clear:

These days even an infant can see that humanity stands at the edge of the abyss. We have learned that one can be a villain even though very cultured and expert in science [...]⁴

Western culture, which prides itself on its scientific sophistication and aesthetic achievements, concealed, according to Heschel, the most vicious grains of evil and dehumanization, not despite but because of its overly rationalistic, utilitarian nature. His personal note in the introduction to the English version of his dissertation, *The Prophets*, resonated with many of the statements written earlier in *The Earth is the Lord's* and in *Pikuach Neshamah*. In 1962 Heschel had summarized his motivation to study the phenomenon of the prophets and prophecy in the academic context of Berlin as follows:

What drove me to study the prophets? In the academic environment in which I spent my student years philosophy had become an isolated, self-subsisting, self-indulgent entity, a Ding a sich, encouraging suspicion instead of love of wisdom. The answers offered were unrelated of man's suspended sensitivity in the face of stupendous challenge, indifferent to a situation, in which good and evil became irrelevant, in which man became increasingly callous to catastrophe and ready to suspend sensitivity in the face of truth. I was slowly led to the realization that some of the terms, motivations, and concerns which dominate our thinking may prove destructive of the roots of human responsibility and treasonable to the ultimate ground of human solidarity.⁵

4 Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Pikuach Neshamah," in: Susannah Heschel, (ed.) *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Abraham Joshua Heschel*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996, p. 58. (hereafter cited as *Pikuach Neshamah*).

5 Abraham J. Heschel, "Introduction" *The Prophets* (New York: Jewish Publications Society, 1962), p. xviii.

The implications of Heschel's remarks on his intellectual odyssey into Berlin and away from it were similar to that of the contemporary thinker Zigmunt Bauman, namely that the Holocaust was the epitome of modernity, one that clearly rested upon modern thinking, modern sociology and certainly upon modern technology. The placing of rationality above values such as sensitivity, personal responsibility and human solidarity reflected the human values promoted by the project of the Enlightenment. The detachment of academic learning from human life created a dichotomy, in his view, between thinking and wisdom. A detached, alienated logic led to an alienated, dehumanizing society, oblivious to the distinction between good and evil.

In *Pikuach Nshamah* Heschel explicitly blamed the Satanic phenomenon of the extermination camps not only on the German people or on the Nazi Party alone but on Western society in general: its apathy, its highly individualistic focus and thus its pagan and idolatrous orientation. While the separation between rationality and wisdom, between inquiry and personal solidarity was and is a sickness of the academic world, the major ills of Western popular culture as Heschel regarded it, concerned the centrality of brainwashing through publicity, public relations, and commercialism and the pursuit of fame that characterized the Western-modern mind.

How easy it is to be attracted to outward beauty and how hard it is to remove the mask and penetrate that which is inside [...] The Satan of publicity dances at the crossroads, moving with full strength. Who is the wise man who has not gone out after him, following his drums and dances? We tend to lick the dust of his feet in order to gain fame. In truth, the soul has only that which is hidden in its world, that which is sealed in its treasure houses.⁷

If we wish to look at the intellectual and spiritual sources of the Holocaust, then, writes Heschel, we must observe the combination of academic aloofness and popular culture's fascination with physical beauty. Common appreciation of beauty alongside superficial apathy to the dangers of the Nazis created the political shortsightedness that had caused the Holocaust. He called our attention to the fact that

When the annual congress of the Nazi Party convened in Nuremberg in 1937, journalists from all over the world, such as the Times of London, described and celebrated with enthusiasm the demonstrations of the various Nazi organizations. They could not find enough adjectives to praise the physical beauty, the order, the discipline, and the athletic perfection of tens of thousands of young Nazis who marched ceremoniously and festively before the leader of the "movement." These writers who were so excited by the exterior splendor lacked the ability to see snakes in the form of humans - the poison that coursed through their veins, which not long after would bring death to millions of people.⁸

6 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Pikuach Neshamah*, p. 58.

7 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Pikuach Neshamah*, p. 56.

8 *Ibid.* pp. 58-59.

“The echoes of the terrible cries that came from the gas chambers, screams the like of which had never been heard in the course of human history, are too horrible to bear,”⁹ he cried. A deceiving Western ideology was to be blamed, he felt, a superficial ideology rooted in the idolatrous Hellenistic culture, one that celebrated aesthetics at the cost of ethics. Judaism, he concluded always asserted “that beauty which is acquired at the cost of justice is an abomination.”¹⁰ “Pagans exalt sacred things” he wrote in *The Earth Is the Lord’s*. “The Prophets extol sacred deeds.”¹¹ Thus evaluating a given society by “the quality of the books, by the number of universities, by the artistic accomplishments, and by scientific discoveries made therein” are pagan criteria.¹²

Therefore, when determined to venture an appraisal of East European Jewry he sets a different criterion, one determined by the Prophets: Jews “gauge culture by the extent to which a whole people, not only individuals, live [...] or strive for spiritual integrity.”¹³

C. FEATURES OF EASTERN EUROPEAN JEWISH CIVILIZATION.

Heschel thought that many of the positive qualities such as democracy, intellectual breadth and freedom, signifying the ideologies that drove his own generation out of the “Jewish Ghetto” and into “the 20th century,” had existed in pre-Modern Ashkenazic culture. “The cosmopolitan breeze of the Enlightenment blowing from the West with its optimistic message of emancipation for all people brought a flash of hope into Jewish communities,”¹⁴ he summarized at the conclusion of *The Earth Is the Lord’s*. Yet, the entire book is aimed at demonstrating that many of the features that attracted his generation to the universities were features of the Jewish civilization that perished. Everyone’s share in learning and observing the Torah, the sociology of learning and praying, created, according to Heschel, a far greater level of human Emancipation within the context of the community than the various social orders that followed “the emancipation.” That traditional form of human equality was not, in his mind, nearly as alienated as the new, rational, individualistic version of equality.

What were his various proofs and examples for that worldview? Heschel regarded the three spiritual pillars of Jewish Ashkenazi civilization, Rashi, Judah the Pious (Yehuda ha-Hasid) and the Baal Shem Tov, as the leaders whose main thrust was to bring Torah and thus, also God and God’s

9 Ibid. p. 66.

10 Ibid. p.59.

11 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Earth Is the Lord’s: The Inner World of the Jew in East Europe*, (New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1950/1956), 14.

12 Ibid. p.9.

13 Ibid. p.9.

14 *The Earth is the Lord’s*, p. 103.

values of gentility and solidarity, down to the people. "It was particularly Rashi," observed Heschel, who brought intellectual emancipation to the people. Without a commentary, the Hebrew Scripture and particularly the Talmud are accessible only to the enlightened few." "Rashi democratized Jewish education, brought the Bible, the Talmud, and the Midrash to the people. He made the Talmud a book, everyman's book. Learning ceased to be a monopoly of the few."¹⁵ It was thanks to that worldview that, according to Heschel, learning and intellectual pursuit were the legacy of the entire people, not just the intellectuals, noting that he found at YIVO a book that "bears the stamp 'Society of Wood-Choppers for the Study of Mishna in Berditchev.'"¹⁶

"As Rashi democratized Jewish education, so in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Rabbi Jehuda he-Hasid and his circle of Hasidim, "the pious" democratized the ideals of mystic piety."¹⁷ And lastly, the Baal Shem Tov democratized human joy and happiness. Heschel's words describe it in a poetic manner: "Then came Rabbi Israel Baal Shem, in the eighteenth century, and brought heaven down to earth. He and his disciples, the Hasidim, banished melancholy from the soul and uncovered the ineffable delight of being a Jew."¹⁸ The essence of Hasidism was, according to Heschel, "freedom of sadness."¹⁹

To conclude, then, Heschel evaluated the two cultures, modern Western culture and traditional Jewish culture, contrary to how his fellow *Maskilim* and non-Orthodox Jews evaluated them. This, perhaps was one more example of what Robert McAfee Brown had observed as the fundamental nature of Heschel's "moral madness."

*We, who share the majority viewpoint, upheld by the status quo, can confidently thrust aside these rude and uninviting fellows, and can tell ourselves that madness and sanity are determined by majority consensus, there still remains the nagging and disturbing question: What if we have things reversed? What if the minority viewpoint is, in fact, the true one? What if the ones we call mad are really sane? What if the rest of us are the ones who fail to see the world as it truly is?*²⁰

Once again had Heschel struck as the upholder of a minority opinion who dared to look at modernity not as a source of hope and light but as a great danger to human destiny and future. Traditional Jewish culture from his perspective promoted more freedom, human dignity and intellectual depth than the philosophers of the Enlightenment. Unlike the great Rabbis, they wrote elitist works, thus neglecting the impoverished masses, leaving them to stumble in the dark of their daily struggles.

15 Ibid. pp. 40- 41.

16 Ibid. pp. 46- 47.

17 Ibid, p. 65.

18 Ibid. p. 76.

19 Ibid. pp. 46-47.

20 Robert McAfee Brown, "Some Are Guilty, All Are Responsible": Heschel's Social Ethics, in: John C. Merkle, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Exploring His Life and Thought*, (New York and London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1985), p. 134.

D. A CRITIQUE OF EASTERN EUROPEAN JUDAISM

But wouldn't we consider such a worldview to be Orthodox? For one thing, Heschel overlooked the fact that the intellectual and spiritual democratization of Eastern European Jewry concerned men alone, and did not address women at all. The two essays slightly reflected Eastern European Jewry's appreciation of women's spirituality in the sense that they "knew that there was in it the charity of Abraham and the tenderness of Rachel."²¹ In the original Hebrew version of *Pikuach Neshamah*, he mentioned the humility that signified his mother's as well as other mothers' virtuous behavior:

האמהות שלנו ידעו ערך הצניעות ובשעה שלא עמדו בנסיון וספרו לחברותיהן על המעשים הטובים שעשו בצנעה, היו פותחות ואומרות: "הרי זה כאילו לא ספרנו!"²²

[Our mothers knew the value of humility and when they erred and told their friends about their good deeds done in private, immediately following they used to say: "It is as if we have not told that at all.]"

Yet, an appreciation of women's spiritual qualities is not the same as admitting that the exclusion of women from Torah study and public prayer was a problem. During his generation, the opening of the doors towards women's participation in modern secular studies created new intellectual opportunities for Jewish women, like his own cousin and fiancée, Gittle (Tova) Perlow who had studied for her doctoral degree at the Sorbonne in the 1930s.²³

However, no or very few Jewish thinkers and writers of the early nineteenth century, whether liberal and Marxist or Zionist Jewish thinkers, were very concerned with the Jewish women's question, thus Heschel was not an exception in that regard. In fact, very few of those thinkers included comments like Heschel's concerning traditional women's and Biblical Matriarchs' spiritual values from which we, moderns, could learn. Most modern Jewish thinkers were influenced by socialism and concerned with economic inequality or with "the scientific" precision of Judaism. Thus, Heschel responded to them by demonstrating the dimension of traditional Torah learning, which was more just than the distribution of knowledge and education in the modern world.

²¹ Ibid, p. 96.

²² אברהם יהושע השיל, "פקוח נשמה: מכבשונה של ההויה היהודית," ניו יורק: הוצאת אגודת המנחלים של בתי הת"ת והישיבות בניו יורק וסביבותיה, ניו יורק בארניאל פרעסט עמ' 2. שם, עמ' 79.

²³ Edward K. Kaplan & Samuel E. Dresner, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Prophetic Witness*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 72.

Heschel's entire book, *The Earth Is the Lord's*, could be seen as a response to the surrealist and sometimes sarcastic literary portrayals of Shalom Abramovich's (Mendele Mocher Sforim) literary sketches of East European Jews as lowly beggars with no dignity in their lives. He even selectively quoted Mendele in his book twice (though, one of the quotes was eliminated from the English version).²⁴

In fact, Heschel's response could, on a certain level, be seen as an indirect yet harsh polemic with Yosef Haim Brenner's vicious attack on traditional Jewry, an attack that Brenner had based on Mendele's writings.²⁵ Heschel's work was aimed at gaining a more sympathetic look at traditional Jewry from a non-Orthodox angle. It is important to recall at this point, that in addition to Heschel's Hassidic *smicha* he had obtained a liberal ordination from the Hochschule in Berlin.²⁶ That ordination had excluded him forever from the Orthodox rabbinic establishment.

Heschel admitted clearly and openly that there were immoral people and abuses among Eastern European Jews.

*Not all the Jews could devote themselves to the Torah and service of God, not all of their old men had the faces of prophets; there were not only Hasidim and Kabbalists, but also yokels and tramps.[...] There were always moralists who publicly branded the abuses that arose in the Jewish communities and hurled flaming denunciations at those who sat above, unconcerned with justice.*²⁷

In the Hebrew version and not in the English version of *The Earth Is the Lord's* there appeared also the following critique of East European Jewry:

²⁸ ויש שהתחילו מדמים כי מה שאסור- אסור ומה שמותר- אסור גם הוא

And there have been those that had imagined that whatever is forbidden is forbidden and whatever is permitted is also forbidden.

One must wonder why Heschel eliminated the sentence from the English version of the book. Was he concerned that in the spirit of Liberal Judaism that observation might be taken out of context when read by American Jews? These words echo Heschel's statement in *Pikuach Neshamah* (published, in Hebrew likewise only during Heschel's lifetime) on the relationship between the past and the present: "We are not of the opinion that everything that has the stamp of the antiquity on it is of the finest. Many garments have

²⁴ אברהם יהושע השל, שמים על הארץ: על החיים הפנימיים של היהודי במזרח אירופה, ירושלים, אוניפרס, 18', 38.

The second quote appears in *The Earth Is the Lord's* on page 43.

²⁵ יוסף חיים ברנר, "הערכת עצמנו בשלשת הכרכים" כתבים, תל אביב:

²⁶ See: Susannah Heschel, "Introduction" in: *Abraham Joshua Heschel, Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays* Edited by Susannah Heschel, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996, p. ix.

²⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Earth is the Lord's*, p. 101.

²⁸ אברהם יהושע השל, שמים על הארץ, עמ' 83.

been worn out, and many areas have been destroyed." Interestingly, another passage eliminated from the English version of *The Earth is the Lord's* was one severely critical of modern Jews:

יהודים כאלה אינם מתפעלים בהתקלס בהם הרשע, הם ידעו את העולם, ולא עשאוהו עבודה זרה; הקידמה לא הוליכה אותם שולל. קסמה של המאה העשרים לא סימא את עיניהם.²⁹

Jews like that are not concerned when evil laughs at them. They knew the world and did not make it an idol to worship. Progress did not falsely tempt them. The enchanting twentieth century did not blind their eyes.

The slight difference between the Hebrew and English versions of the book, both published in his lifetime, testify that Heschel, like many multilingual Jewish writers of his time and earlier (Mendele and Berdichevsky for example) was very conscious of what could and could not be heard and internalized within different audiences. His English readers could misuse the statement admitting the unnecessary stringencies of *halachah*, yet could be upset by comparing Western civilization to idolatry, a comparison that is widely repeated, once again, in his Hebrew essay, *Pikuach Neshamah*. In either case, the point of the whole essay was to awaken in his generation their sense of *teshuvah* concerning harsh criticism of traditional Judaism and blindness regarding the darkness of the Enlightenment. That call is found mainly in the last chapter of the book.

E. THE WEAKNESSES OF THE MODERN JUDAISM:

Heschel's words in 1945, directed at his own generation awakened by the horrors of the Holocaust, seem very much like his own, personal confession written around the time in which he had made the transition from HUC to JTS. Thus, in 1945, he observed:

In the spiritual confusion of the last hundred years, many of us overlooked the incomparable beauty of our old, poor homes. We compared our fathers and grandfathers, our scholars and rabbis, with Russian or German intellectuals. We preached in the name of the twentieth century, measured the merits of Berdichev and Ger with the standards of Paris and Heidelberg. Dazzled by the lights of the metropolis, we lost at times the inner sights. The luminous visions that for so many generations shone in the little candles extinguished for some of us.³⁰ [...]

In our zeal to change, in our passion to advance, we ridiculed superstition until we lost our ability to believe. We have helped to extinguish the light our fathers had kindled. We have bartered holiness for convenience, loyalty for success, wisdom for information, prayers for sermons, tradition for fashion.³¹

²⁹ Ibid., 79.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid. 106.

When Heschel had criticized the striving for extreme rationality, he may have been engaging in a polemic with the Reform movement and/or with Mordecai Kaplan at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Yet, **his call goes further than that**. He certainly considered himself among those taken by the false idols of modernity. He did not overlook the attempts of Jewish renewal in Germany of which he was part. Yet he was critical of those attempts as well. Gradually, the beauty of the old days and the emptiness of present-day civilization have been disclosed. But the time has been too short and the will too weak. Clarity and solidarity have been lacking not only in the spiritual but also in political matters.³²

One wonders what Heschel meant by the statement concerning the absence of clarity and solidarity. Did he refer to the lack of solidarity of Western, mostly, liberal Jews towards Eastern European Jewry? Or was he alluding to something else? In any case, the movement for Jewish renewal in the end, did not preserve, according to Heschel, the light we ought to preserve.

He, like many leading Jewish intellectuals at his time, had turned to Berlin, the capital of the Jewish Enlightenment, and was taken by the city that had symbolized, for that generation, the “cosmopolitan breeze blowing from the West.”³³ It was for the sake of finding the metaphysical truth in the writings of “leading German intellectuals” that his soul yearned to be there. It was his generation, many of them present in the audience in YIVO in 1945, that sought, like him, to exchange the world of Berdichev and Ger with the world of Kant, Hegel, Husserl or Heidegger, and the result was, helping to “extinguish the light our fathers kindled.”

Heschel essentially wondered how we did not realize that the evils produced by traditional Jews due to their “one-sidedness of learning, neglect of manners, provincialism” as well as “abuses that arose in the Jewish community”³⁴ were insignificant when compared to the enormous evils and crimes emerging out of “Europe [...] the twentieth century” and [...] Western Civilization?³⁵ For precisely that reason, “it was easier” for him “to appraise the beauty of traditional Jewish life than the revolutionary spirituality of modern Jews.”

F. THE CALL TO MODERN JEWS:

This soul-searching was not aimed at creating guilt feelings but at calling Jews to action: “All that remains is a sanctuary hidden in the realm of spirit,” he wrote. “We of this generation are still holding the key. Unless we remember, unless we unlock it, the holiness of ages will remain the secret of God... The tasks begun by the patriarchs and prophets and continued by their

32 Ibid, p. 106.

33 Ibid, p. 103.

34 Ibid, pp. 100- 101.

35 Ibid. pp. 104.

descendants are now entrusted to us” he wrote. “We are either the last Jews or those who will hand over the entire past to the generations to come.”³⁶

It is only in the context of demonstrating the idolatrous and violent nature of Western European secular civilization, alongside the relatively minor shortcomings of Eastern European Jewry that Heschel could make his intellectual plea for the preservation of that spirit within the new centers of modern Jewry. It is in these two essays, written four years apart, in 1945 and 1949 where, step by step, he clearly his educational and spiritual agendas: to demonstrate the idolatrous nature of Western secular civilization, to awaken memories of the Jewish past, and to call upon Jews to make Judaism and the Jewish People a sign of God’s presence in the world. In these two essays, in his unique poetic way, he laid down, almost point by point, the elements of the Eastern European Era in Judaism that could and must continue to live through us. In order to unearth them we could go back from the end of *The Earth is the Lord’s* to its beginning while comparing it to *Pikuach Neshamah* and see what elements of Jewish life in Eastern Europe could continue in the two new Jewish centers: Israel and the United States. The themes that he had emphasized in the essays appeared later in his works as part of the zeal to rekindle the light extinguished by the Holocaust.

G. REVIVING THE SPIRIT OF EASTERN EUROPEAN JEWRY: AN AUTHENTIC JEWISH RESPONSE TO MODERNITY

1. *The Sabbath.*

As I have earlier argued, the two essays, *The Earth is the Lord’s* and *Pikuach Neshamah*, both “theological biographies of an endangered culture,” include many themes that Heschel later developed in his books. The first one is his emphasis on the Sabbath as a conceptual pillar of Judaism. The comments scattered on the Sabbath are worth paying attention to, as he would further develop them in his book, *The Sabbath*, which appeared in 1951, two years following the publication of *Pikuach Neshamah*.

*The Jews had always known piety and Sabbath holiness. The new thing in Eastern Europe was that somewhat of the Sabbath was infused into every day[...] There were no operas in their little town; yet what they felt when attending the Third Sabbath Meal, no songs were eloquent enough to express. Jews did not build magnificent synagogues; they built bridges leading from the heart to God.*³⁷

The millions of Jews who were destroyed bear witness to the fact that as long as people do not accept the commandment “Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy,” the commandment “Though shalt not kill” will likewise fail to be operative in life

³⁶ Ibid. p. 107.

³⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Earth Is the Lord’s*, pp. 97-98.

[...] *The human species is on its deathbed. In order to seek cure, we should not desecrate the Sabbath, rather it is incumbent upon us to sanctify the weekdays.*³⁸

Two implications of these passages are worth noting. One, that Heschel considers the self-restraint that the Sabbath teaches an irreplaceable educational vehicle to teach self-restraint in interpersonal human relations. Thus, he directly links together the two commandments prohibiting murder and desecration of the Sabbath as a statement concerning the intertwining of Jewish survival with universal ethics. The second point concerns the timing in which the book *The Sabbath* was first conceived and published. These were the years of Heschel's transition to JTS and the years in which the Conservative Movement's Law Committee passed the decision permitting driving to the synagogue on Shabbat.³⁹ Heschel's book should perhaps be seen a theological response to prevent or reverse the reality permitting rabbis to drive on Shabbat and making driving on Shabbat a religious norm in the Conservative Movement. The method he chose, a book on the philosophical and moral value of Shabbat, was non-polemical and educational. That is because, unlike in Christianity as Heschel understood it, sin in Judaism has only a negative connotation: "to sin means to fail, to take an inappropriate step."⁴⁰ Driving on the Sabbath is therefore a simple misunderstanding of the deep educational and moral meanings of the commandment to keep the Sabbath.

2. Sexual Discipline.

Likewise at the end of the nineteen sixties, with the spread of the new ethic of sexual freedom and "free love," Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel dared to ponder the relevance of the ideal of sexual continence in an age when the media inundate the public with a profuse amount of blatant sexual imagery. In his work, *A Passion for Truth*, a comparison of the philosophies of the founder of Hasidism, the Ba'al Shem Tov, the Danish-Christian theologian Soren Kierkegaard, and the Hasidic spiritual leader, the Kotzker Rabbi, Heschel devotes one chapter to the issue of sex and sexuality.⁴¹ In describing the period when the Kotzker Rabbi withdrew from society, remaining celibate, Heschel writes the following:

*Like Kierkegaard, the Kotzker saw human sexuality as the opposite of spirituality. Yet, by contrast, he did not discourage marriage, since Judaism sees celibacy as unnatural ... He could not discourage marriage which Judaism sees as a divine commandment ... Opposition to marriage would have implied a repudiation of nearly all the Biblical and rabbinic personalities, who were passionately attached and never ceased to exalt marriage. They never maintained that love between a man and woman is incompatible with a love of God.*⁴²

38 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Pikuach Neshamah*, pp. 66-67.

39 *Teshuva* by Rabbis Morris Adler, Jacob Agus and Theodore Friedman, *Proceedings of the R.A.* 1950, pp. 112-37.

40 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Pikuach Neshamah*, p. 62.

41 I wish to thank Rabbi Dr. Michael Marmor for pointing out that theme in Heschel's latest book.

42 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *A Passion for Truth*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), p. 221.

Heschel, like many other thinkers before him, presents marriage and procreation as the only sexual lifestyle sanctioned by Judaism due to his polemic against Christianity (embodied in the description of Kierkegaard's character). Yet in his description of the Kotzker Rabbi, Heschel wished, first of all, to emphasize the importance of marriage. Simultaneously, he wanted to show a generation that had grown up during the sexual revolution of the 1960s the need for a different and more restrained outlook on the importance of sex, sexual satisfaction, and sexuality in one's life. He sought to show that the primary goal of marriage is to provide a framework for men and women to raise children together, in an atmosphere of mutual respect and warmth shared by men and women. Sexual and emotional satisfaction was only a secondary goal. Through the personality of the Kotzker Rabbi, Heschel wanted to emphasize that "deprived of biological release, the body might weep, but the imagination would remain fresh and pure."⁴³

3. *Breaking social alienation through learning and mitzvot.*

Heschel did not provide a random report of the details of Jewish life in Eastern Europe. His hope that many elements of that life would be resurrected and incorporated into the Jewish lives at the new Jewish centers was reflected in his attempt to demonstrate how sharing of the Torah, both in the sense of learning and practicing, created a community of people who cared for each other and for the world. "Mitzvah in Yiddish means to do what is good in a positive concrete sense" he wrote, noting that it is a way to create a society with internal radiance, an instrument to create a human fabric that brings holiness to the world.⁴⁴ "Every people has a religion which it has received from others, but we are the only people which is unified with our Torah: all parts of the nation, not only the elite few" he emphasized. In this last remark he perhaps criticized the Orthodox again for setting themselves aside from the rest of the Jewish People.

4. *Tradition.*

Heschel advocated *a way of thinking that was independent and free of modern biases*. In that regard we hear an echo of his criticisms of Reform Jewry. Throughout his works Heschel preached an approach of gratitude towards life, together with appreciation of historical Judaism. He never neglected, and recommended that we never neglect, skepticism towards superficial beauty promoted by modern culture as a cover-up for modernity's alienation and violence. Willingness to change *halachah* when possible and necessary must be modified, according to him, by those attitudes. The principle for halachic change should be as follows:

Most people [...] tend to look upon everything in the past as useless, and they are willing to exchange the glory of ancient days for the shiny newness of

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Pikuach Neshamah*, p. 63.

today. They forget that it is not within the power of one individual or within the power of a single generation to construct a bridge that leads to the Truth. Let us not discriminate against the structure which many generations have nourished and built up. "The sacred entities of the children of Israel – do not profane them!" (Numbers 18:32).⁴⁵

5. Jewish Solidarity.

A sense of Jewish solidarity and love of all Jews in all generations is the foundation of the idea and the reality of the Torah shared by all the People of Israel. Heschel, once again, indirectly rebukes the Jewish enlightenment of Western Europe and North America for being too individualistic, thus destroying the organic nature necessary for maintaining a thriving Jewish life. Even "heretics," Marxists and socialists among Eastern European Jewry were part and parcel of the solidarity of Jewish life there.

*The masses of East European Jews repudiated Emancipation when it was offered at the price of disloyalty to Israel's traditions. Both pious and free-thinking Jews fought for a dignified existence, striving to assure the rights of the community, not only the individual. They manifested a collective will for collective aim. With lightning rapidity, they straightened their backs and learned to master the arts and sciences [...] Three thousand years of history has not made them weary. Their spirits were animated by a vitality that often drove them into opposition to accepted tenets.*⁴⁶

It is for that reason that the very last passage of *Pikuach Neshamah* emphasized that "not only the children of Israel in a single generation but all the children of Israel in all generations comprise the nation. We share a single status and destiny... The love of the people of Israel is inconceivable if we don't walk with the generations that produced us, and vice versa: without love for the Jews of our time – including even the frivolous and vacuous among them."

6. Zionism.

It is now clear why, in both of these essays, Heschel endorsed Zionism. Although he bemoaned the fact that the Zionists had deserted religion, he definitely maintained a much more favorable attitude towards the founders of the Jewish center in Israel than towards the Western Jewish Enlightenment.⁴⁷ His voice on that matter is clear and unambiguous. The commitment to the building of *Eretz Yisrael* was in his mind incumbent upon all Jews. It is in Israel that he thought an organic mode of Jewish life could continue. The secular Zionists were in his mind modern-day Hassidim who offered their souls and lives to the Jewish People.⁴⁸ At the end of *Pikuach Neshamah* he offers a story of a shoemaker who fixed the shoes of a Keren Kayemet fundraiser,

45 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Pikuach Neshamah*, p. 65.

46 Ibid. p. 105

47 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Earth is the Lord's*, p. 64.

48 Ibid. p. 103.

since he had no money to donate to the rebuilding of Eretz Yisrael. Heschel regarded the story as a model of ultimate dedication and self-sacrifice by a simple man for the survival of the Jewish People, since, according to him, "the primary concern of the Jew is [...] that he assure the continued existence of the people of Israel."⁴⁹ "Just as it is incumbent upon us to be human beings," he wrote, "so it is our obligation to be Jews."⁵⁰ For that reason, he concluded, "we are called upon to be pioneers for the Torah of Israel and for the Land of Israel and bring their power to all the regions of the Diaspora."⁵¹ It seems that there is no better way to describe his life and thought than this declaration. Unlike many of his close friends, though, for various reasons he himself chose to live in New York. There he saw himself as a pioneer as a transmitter of a vanished, precious world to those who had no clue what that life really meant. He was hoping that his readers and students would take it upon themselves to live their lives like their ancestors, to make their lives Torah. And Torah as he understood it was by definition intertwined with Eretz Yisrael and its rebuilding, no matter where the Jew ends up living.

F. CONCLUSION AND EVALUATION

To conclude, Heschel emerges from these two essays as a "middle-of-the-road" thinker. Critical of the Zionists for forsaking religion, critical of the Orthodox for clinging to the past and to halachic stringencies, and for isolating themselves from the People of Israel, and critical of the Reform Movement and perhaps also the Conservative Movement for being taken in by modernity's idolatry. One can understand why his biography, written by Edward Kaplan, suggests that he was at times such a "lonely man of faith."⁵² One might argue that at the beginning of the 21st century, with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism as a frightening political threat, and the fall of the two major secular ideologies (Fascism and Communism), his critique of the Western World is no longer valid. Yet, we should remember that even in the face of the Fascist ideology Heschel continued to be a Zionist, and in the face of a Communist and socialist intelligentsia he continued to be an observant Jew. Likewise, Heschel would argue that, with all its faults and discriminations, the traditional Jewish world of today produces far less violence and inflicts less suffering on human beings than either Islamic fundamentalism or Western global imperialistic capitalism. One may therefore conclude that in that sense both *The Earth Is the Lord's* and *Pikuach Neshamah* are truly prophetic works.

49 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Pikuach Neshama*, p. 65.

50 Ibid. p. 66.

51 Ibid. p. 67.

52 Bari Weiss, "The Lonely Man of Faith," *Haaretz*, 9.12.07, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=932621>