

Religion and Social Justice:  
The Approaches of Abraham Joshua Heschel and Arthur Waskow

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### I. Introduction:

Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972) and Arthur Waskow (1933-) express many of the same central societal concerns; however, they ground their activism in different conceptions of God and Jewish sources. Both criticize society and specifically the American Jewish community's concern with superficial matters and failure to deal with more profound spiritual, social, and political issues. Yet, the relative emphasis they place on various societal issues and their religious approaches to social activism are different. Heschel has a God-centric and more strictly Jewish approach, grounded predominately in prayer and study of biblical texts. By contrast, Waskow more so encourages the use of ritual, holidays, and Jewish historical experience. For Heschel, God, conceived of as an active deity, demands that Jews engage in social justice. For Waskow, the impetus to engage in social justice concerns God but also powerfully resides in the ability of Jews, as a community, to draw on rituals, together with historical experience, applying their relevant lessons to contemporary issues. Both Heschel and Waskow assert that religion and Judaism have tremendous relevancy in the world and contribute much to social justice, however guided by their differing ideologies, regarding the role of God and the sources they consider most pertinent, they articulate a different manner in which Jews can use religion toward their activism.

### II. Heschel - Central Societal Concerns:

Heschel and Waskow do share notable similarities regarding their central societal concerns. The main difference is that Heschel focuses more attention on the Jewish community and strictly religious issues, while Waskow focuses more on political and economic issues. Nonetheless, for both thinkers, one of the most troubling problems is the lack of spirituality and attention to profound issues in society at large and within the Jewish community. Heschel argues that people lack spirituality, tending to focus on petty and superficial diversions related to self-interest, rather than profound questions and important social issues. Religion, focusing on profound questions and humans' authentic needs – that is their spiritual and intellectual ones –<sup>1</sup> serves as an antidote to society's preoccupation with trivial matters. Heschel contends that religions have validity when they respond to “real urgencies and questions and problems.”<sup>2</sup> However, in “Existence and Celebration,” Heschel criticizes Jewish institutions for their failure to foster greater spirituality and promote the value of intellectualism and social activism. Without spiritual motivation, Jews have become complacent, neglecting a long and powerful legacy of Jewish activism. Lacking spirituality, Jews do not aspire to something greater, both in terms of realizing their own potential, and using it toward improving the world through engaging in social justice. Expounding on this principle, Heschel claims that “modern man has royal power and plebeian ideals.”<sup>3</sup> America's “major problem” is the “self-profanation of man,” “the loss of reverence,” “the liquidation of enthusiasm for the

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1. “Carl Stern Interview with Dr. Heschel,” 409.

2. Ibid.

3. Heschel, “Existence and Celebration,” 31.

attainment of transcendent goals.”<sup>4</sup> Heschel suggests that the first step to engaging more critically on matters of social justice is experiencing a sense of “radical embarrassment” with the current state of affairs. Frustrated with complacency and seeking spiritual “direction” and “affirmation,”<sup>5</sup> he claims that the young generation has already begun this process.

### III. Waskow - Central Societal Concerns

Similarly, Waskow invokes the necessity of fostering greater spirituality and derides society and the Jewish community’s preoccupation with superficial matters. In “Bush is Burning,” Waskow claims that Jewish institutions failure to promote spirituality in the 1930s and 1940s<sup>6</sup> has led to his generation’s struggle to link the Jewish and progressive aspects of their identity. He views it as a significant loss that the previous generation of Jews opted for a conventional, safer, socially palatable form of Judaism. Not promoting Jewish spirituality, in part, has resulted in the previous generation of Jews’ inaction on pressing political issues, when Judaism has, in fact, very relevant ethical contributions to make. Waskow, who saw politics and religion as fundamentally linked, was particularly active in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s as well as opposition to the Vietnam War; Heschel also dedicated himself to both causes and took part in the March on Washington. Waskow saw strong links between Jewish values and these movements for equality and pacifism. In his later writings and activism, Waskow continues to exhibit considerable concern regarding issues of social and economic import. In a similar fashion to Heschel’s critique of people’s petty diversions, in “Sabbatical and Jubilee,” Waskow criticizes “attachment” to material values, “hyper-modernity,”<sup>7</sup> and economic globalization. Indicative of the strong connection he sees between Judaism and principles of equity, as expressed in the Jubilee and Sabbatical, he advocates for contemporary Jewish communities to engage in small-scale equitable distribution of wealth, ensuring that all of their members’ economic, social, and health-related needs are met. The degree to which Waskow focuses on such social and economic concerns differentiates him from Heschel, who insisted that Jewish communities’ chief task was to foster greater spirituality. In fact, expressing his opinion on this matter, Heschel states, “Our practical, immediate day to day needs, such as health insurance, are generally provided for; but our spiritual needs are *not* being fulfilled;”<sup>8</sup> our “divine need for human justice and nobility” is of utmost importance.<sup>9</sup>

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4. Ibid., 30.

5. Ibid., 28.

6. Waskow, “Bush is Burning,” 16.

6. Waskow, “Sabbatical and Jubilee,” 262.

7. Heschel, “Existence and Celebration,” 26.

8. Ibid., 32.

#### IV. Heschel's Approach toward Activism - Faith in God:

Critical to understanding Heschel's approach toward social justice is his conception of God. Heschel adheres to a traditional biblical view of God as an active, engaged deity, and he views God as a strong motivator for action and social justice. Heschel asserts that one of the main reasons God wants us to be responsive to injustice in the world is the very strong relationship between God and humans; literally, God created man as a reminder of himself.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, he expects humans to exhibit behaviour that demonstrates respect for him and fellow humans. Explaining his opposition to the Vietnam War, rather than tying it the value Judaism places on pacifism as Waskow might do, Heschel asserts explicitly that killing people in war is wrong because it is akin to killing God. Above all, God demands "justice and compassion," while he most fervently condemns "killing innocent people."<sup>11</sup> Individuals should strive in their actions to represent the divine. In addition, humans are in a capacity to act since God has given man freedom and the potential to do anything.<sup>12</sup> Above all, Heschel insists that Jews understand God as being a demanding presence in humans' lives. "God reaches us as a claim. Religious responsibility is responsiveness to the claim. He brought us out of slavery. And he demands."<sup>13</sup> Not viewing God as being deeply concerned with temporal affairs – in the sense that he wants *people* to act – has contributed to some of the worst episodes in human history. Horrible atrocities, such as the Holocaust, which affected Heschel's family directly, are not part of God's plan, but rather the result of human callousness alone and abetted by bystanders' inaction. According to Heschel, the misinformed conception of God as being in full control of human affairs has led to impassivity, as individuals shirk their responsibilities to stop injustice, thinking this is God's duty. However, Heschel's seeks to directly refute this notion, asserting the opposite, that God has given significant agency to, and has tasked humans with the responsibility of stopping injustice.

#### V. Heschel's Approach toward Activism- Prophetic Tradition and Prayer:

While Heschel draws on a few different Jewish sources in making his claim for activism, the ones he emphasizes most as vehicles for social justice are the Prophetic tradition and prayer. These sources reflect the importance he places on God, Torah, the Jewish intellectual tradition, and power of spirituality. He insists that Jews' motivation for social justice requires a revival of the "sublime insights of Jewish piety, the noble demands of Jewish law and observance."<sup>14</sup> The primacy Heschel places on the Prophets relates to the fact that he sees great inspiration in the Bible, which he regards as the direct word of God, and a rich repository for Jewish values. Indeed, the Prophets' central message concerns not taking part in

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9. "Carl Stern Interview with Dr. Heschel," 400.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid., 397.

12. Heschel, "On Prayer," 261.

13. Heschel, "Existence and Celebration," 32.

injustice “bloodshed” to “one’s fellow man” and promoting “peace.”<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the Prophets are worthy of all Jews’ emulation because they were able simultaneously to hold God and man in the same mindset. Through their dialogue with God, they understood his profound concern with human affairs, and in turn, sought to improve what was wrong in the world. Heschel regards it as a grave problem that the Prophets are not read more in contemporary society. He insists that the tasks “begun by Abraham, Moses, Amos, and continued by their descendants, are now entrusted to us.” Jews have a responsibility to “hand over” the Jewish legacy emphasizing piety and social justice, exemplified by the Prophets, to the next generation.<sup>16</sup>

Prayer provides a means for Jews to emulate the mindset of the Prophets, experience a stronger connection with God as well as greater awareness and sympathy for fellow humans, and in turn, be motivated to engage in social justice. First, prayer is a “gateway for radical amazement,” for greater sensitization, bridging the divide both between the participant and God and fellow humans. Once one is prompted by their sense of “radical embarrassment” to seek greater spirituality, prayer, leading to “radical amazement,” provides actual inspiration for social justice. Fundamentally, there are two components to prayer: praise for God, illustrated through the Kaddish,<sup>17</sup> and deepening one’s compassion regarding others’ plight.<sup>18</sup> Outlining how prayer becomes a vehicle for social justice, Heschel explains that through prayer, opening up to God, a person feels inadequacy, which motivates them to do better and improve the world. Prayer principally involves one’s concern for and behaviour towards others. Prayer must “never be a citadel for selfish concerns but rather a place for deepening concern over other people’s plight.”<sup>19</sup> Prayer serves as a “voice of mercy, as a cry for justice, as a plea for gentleness.”<sup>20</sup> More than a mere episode, a cursory incident, Heschel explains, prayer is a state of being; it must pervade all of our actions. Kindness and charity are themselves “prayer in the form of deed.”<sup>21</sup> Through study of the Prophets and engagement with prayer, Heschel believes Jews gain powerful inspiration to respond to society’s problems.

#### VI. Waskow’s Approach to Activism – Spirituality, Ritual and Revitalization:

Unlike Heschel, who asserts God’s demanding role in motivating social justice, Waskow subscribes more to a conception of God as a spiritual presence. Waskow’s perspective is evident in the sources he draws on. Whereas Heschel emphasized how the Prophets and prayer, often through a personal and reflective process, allow people to empathize with others and engage in social action, Waskow maintains that prayer is important, but also lauds the power of Jewish rituals and holiday, especially

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14. “Carl Stern Interview with Dr. Heschel,” 400.

15. Heschel, “Existence and Celebration,” 27.

16. Heschel, “On Prayer,” 260.

17. *Ibid.*, 262.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*, 261.

20. *Ibid.*, 258.

within a communal context. Both Heschel and Waskow advocate returning to original Jewish sources. However, for Heschel, the collective legacy of Judaism, embodied in texts and prayer that facilitate a connection with God, is what inspires Jews to engage social justice. By contrast, for Waskow, the legacy of Jewish values and its potential for activism is discovered through rituals and holidays, and applying their lessons to contemporary social issues. For example, during the 1960s, wanting to connect with African-Americans in their struggle for equality, Waskow derived the “Freedom Seder,” not a reinvention of Jewish rituals, but rather an appropriation of the core meaning of the Passover Seder, emphasizing people’s liberation, to contemporary social issues. This approach to ritual is evident in Waskow’s treatment of Hanukkah as well, which he asserts, in similar fashion to Passover, has universalist significance. Playing off the holiday’s motif of preserving a small amount of light, Waskow makes a creative argument for energy conservation.

A likely point of difference with Heschel, who is more traditional in his conception of ritual, is the fact that Waskow advocates that rituals might need to be revitalized, but not fundamentally changed, to have true relevance both in the contemporary world and within the Jewish community. Within the Jewish community itself, Waskow views ritual as serving a very important purpose in making Jewish spirituality relevant in people’s everyday life. He wants to make synagogues greater spiritual centers, which requires developing “communal Jewish expressions for such life-moments as learning to drive an automobile, leaving home, beginning one’s first full-time serious job, reaching menopause...retiring...”<sup>22</sup> Likewise, Heschel called for the cultivation of the “Jewish art of sensing the glory through acts of daily celebration,”<sup>23</sup> and indeed wanted the Sabbath to be honoured. However, whereas Heschel stressed cultivating spirituality through observance of rituals in their traditional form, Waskow claims that communities while continuing to “bear Torah values,”<sup>24</sup> should seek to adapt Jewish rituals to everyday life. For example, synagogues should make Shabbat into an experience that “speaks to the deeper needs and hopes of most of their members.”<sup>25</sup> To be sure, Waskow is addressing the reality that synagogues have taken on greater roles in their congregants’ lives than during Heschel’s time. While both thinkers insist that Jewish institutions must respond to the “deeper,” spiritual needs of their congregants, toward this end, Waskow asserts a greater role for synagogues in promoting rituals and communal affirmation. Compared to Heschel, Waskow envisions a broader, more creative function for holidays and ritual in motivating social justice in society at large and fostering greater spirituality in the Jewish community.

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21. Waskow, “Sabbatical and Jubilee,” 269.

22. Heschel, “Existence and Celebration,” 21.

23. Waskow, “Sabbatical and Jubilee,” 268.

24. Waskow, “Sabbatical and Jubilee,” 269.

## VII. Conclusion –Approaches to Faith-Based Social Justice:

Studying Heschel and Waskow's work elucidates important similarities and differences in Jewish approaches toward social justice and allows for comparison with Christian thinkers' approaches. While Heschel and Waskow focus on similar social issues, especially the importance of fostering greater spirituality, they advocate different approaches toward social justice, guided by the relative emphasis they place on God and the sources they draw on. Waskow's renewal approach to Judaism and social justice emphasizes the importance of revitalizing Jewish holidays and rituals and applying their messages to contemporary issues. By contrast, Heschel promotes a more traditionalist approach toward social justice, invoking the centrality of God, Torah, and prayer. Heschel's more conventional approach toward religion and social justice is similar in its basic premises, specifically in its emphasis on God and Bible, to the approach of Pope John Paul II. Like Heschel, John Paul II focuses strongly on the relationship and identification between God and Man as rationale for social justice. A linchpin of his philosophy is that each person is created in God's image, accorded the same dignity and, thus, deserving of equal treatment and respect. In arguing that workers' rights must be respected in "Rerum Novarum," he repeatedly affirms the "dignity of the worker" as a rationale for just working conditions. Furthermore, like Heschel, whose approach relies significantly on the Torah and the Prophets, John Paul II grounds his call for social justice explicitly in biblical texts. Just as Heschel claims Jews must act on the social justice message of the Prophets, in "Centesimus Annus," John Paul II asserts that Christians must take "the social message of the Gospel," calling for assistance to the poor and needy, not simply as "theory" but as a "basis and a motivation for action."<sup>26</sup> Heschel, Waskow, and John Paul II all assert religion's instructive role in motivating activism, yet demonstrate how differences in theology contribute to alternative approaches toward faith-based social justice.

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25. John Paul II, "Centesimus Annus," 57.