

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

# Abraham Joshua Heschel, a Jewish prophet for our time



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"I felt my legs were praying." These are the words of the famed Jewish scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel, when he reflected on his participation with Martin Luther King Jr. in the Selma march for voter rights in 1965. This week, falling between the two High Holy Days in the Jewish tradition, is an appropriate time to recall Heschel's influence in the civil rights movement over 50 years ago. Friday evening began Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, and next Sunday evening is the beginning of Yom Kippur. These days for the Jewish community focus on introspection and repentance.

Perhaps it is a time for all of us to reflect on the failure in our society to fully incorporate all members of our community regardless of race, religion or national origin.

Heschel, born in Poland and ordained as an Orthodox rabbi, received his Ph.D. from the University of Berlin, but was then expelled from Germany and eventually came to America. Sadly, however, his mother and two sisters did not survive the Nazi atrocities.

Arriving in America in 1940, he served as a professor at Hebrew Union College and then at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City. Heschel published 17 books and dozens of articles and is considered one of the leading Jewish theologians of the 20th century. Heschel was well known for his role in the civil rights movement and his relationship with King. He was featured along with King, John Lewis and other faith leaders in the front row of the famed Selma march to Montgomery on behalf of voting rights for African Americans.

For Heschel and King, civil rights was an interfaith endeavor. King was also very influenced by the Hindu organizer Mahatma Gandhi and his commitment to non-violence. Heschel and King met in 1963, two years prior to the Selma march, at a Chicago conference on religion and race. Heschel gave the opening address and noted that the first conference on religion and race featured Pharaoh and Moses, but that the outcome of that summit had not come to an end. He continued, "Pharaoh is not ready to capitulate. The exodus began, but is far from having been completed. In fact, it was easier for the children of Israel to cross the Red Sea than for a Negro to cross certain university campuses."

Heschel told the gathering that religion is to unite what divides and that humanity "as a whole is God's beloved child." He called racism worse than idolatry, an unmitigated evil, "man's gravest threat to man" and "a deadly poison that inflames the eye."

In today's call for racial justice, it is often noted that systemic racism is a problem for the white community to address. Only those with power can correct the inequities in the system. Heschel, nearly 60 years earlier, addressed our collective responsibility in language relevant today. So here follows a number of important excerpts from his Chicago speech:

- "One hundred years ago the emancipation was proclaimed. It is time for the white man to strive for self-emancipation, to set himself free of bigotry, to stop being a slave to wholesale contempt."
- "What afflicts my conscience is that my face, whose skin happens not to be dark, instead of radiating the likeness of God, has come to be taken as an image of haughty assumption and overbearance. Whether justified or not, I, the white man, have become in the eyes of others a symbol of arrogance and pretension, giving offense to other human beings, hurting their pride, even without intending it. My very presence inflicting insult!"
- "Daily we patronize institutions which are visible manifestations of arrogance toward those whose skin differs from ours. Daily we cooperate with people who are guilty of active discrimination."

➤ "Most of us are content to delegate the problem to the courts, as if justice were a matter for professionals or specialists. But to do justice is what God demands of every man: it is the supreme commandment, and one that cannot be fulfilled vicariously."

➤ "There is an evil which most of us condone and are even guilty of: indifference to evil. We remain neutral, impartial and not easily moved by the wrongs done unto other people."

➤ "It is time for the white man to repent. We have failed to use the avenues open to us to educate the hearts and minds of men, to identify ourselves with those who are underprivileged. But repentance is more than contrition and remorse for sins, for harms done. Repentance means a new insight, a new spirit. It also means a course of action."

His attitude can be summed up in his oft-quoted statement that in a free society, "Some are guilty, but all are responsible." As individuals, we may not be guilty of our nation's historical slavery, or Jim Crow laws, or specific overt acts of racism, but we are participants in a free society with the right to vote and act in ways to change the actions, policies and practices of our institutions.

King referred to Heschel as a modern-day prophet, and they remained friends and colleagues in the civil rights efforts of that day.

Susannah Heschel tells of her father's appointment as a visiting professor at the Protestant Union Theological Seminary. His inaugural lecture was titled "No Religion is an Island."

Heschel may have differed in theology with others on that Selma march, but they all shared the religious and ethical demand for justice and the treatment of all people as children of God. The civil rights movement of the 1960s was an interfaith effort. Today, we must join together from our various faith commitments to continue that religious imperative. As Heschel relayed in his Chicago address, we must not "worry more about the purity of our dogma than about the integrity of our love."

Heschel's daughter, Susannah Heschel, is a professor of Judaic Studies at Dartmouth College and gave a lecture in 2017 on the relationship between King and her father. She tells of her own visit to Selma and visiting the home of Dr. Sullivan Jackson and his wife, Richie Jean Jackson, where King and others including Heschel were staying prior to the march. As Richie Jean Jackson came into the living room that morning, she saw many still sleeping, but noticed King in one part of the room praying while Heschel was in another part, also praying. For both of them and for most of the others, this was a religious issue. It was a justice issue motivated by their various religious beliefs. Those early morning prayers of Heschel transferred later to what he described as feeling that his "legs were praying" as they marched together from Selma to Montgomery that morning. Susannah Heschel's entire lecture is available at [bit.ly/heschellecure](http://bit.ly/heschellecure).

Heschel concluded his talk at the Chicago conference on religion and race, quoting, as King often did, the words of the prophet Amos:

"Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream." (Amos 5:24)

During our current challenges, let us join efforts across all religious traditions to seek such a justice for all of God's children.

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**Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, right, walks with Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights activists during the Selma to Montgomery march on March 21, 1965.**

*AdvanceLocal files*

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