

Choose Life – Old and new thoughts for a New Year

Choose Life!

reflection by
Abraham Joshua Heschel

I would say that the major religious problem today is the systematic liquidation of man's sensitivity to the challenge of God. Let me try to explain that. We cannot understand man in his own terms. Man is not to be understood in the image of nature, in the image of an animal, or in the image of a machine. He has to be understood in terms of a transcendence, and that transcendence is not a passive thing; it is a challenging transcendence. Man is always being challenged; a question is always being asked of him. The moment man disavows the living transcendence, he is contracted; he is reduced to a level on which his distinction as a human being gradually disappears. What makes a man human is his openness to transcendence, which lifts him to a higher level than himself. Overwhelmed by the power he has achieved, man now has the illusion of sovereignty; he has become blind to his own situation, and deaf to the question being asked of him.

To destroy the illusion that man is his own center cannot be done easily. In order to understand, and to cultivate an openness to transcendence, many prerequisites are necessary, prerequisites of the mind and of the heart. However, our society, our education, all continue to corrode mens' sensibilities. I am not optimistic; we are getting poorer by the day. To give you an example: Man does not feel a sense of outrage anymore, even in the face of crime. We are getting used to it. We are getting accustomed to evil. We are surrendering to that which we call inevitable. That is fatalism; it is pagan. The message of the Bible is that man is capable of making a choice. Choose life -- but instead we choose death, blindness, callousness, helplessness, despair.

Religion, if taught as religion, has no life. In order to understand what the Bible says, one has to understand life as seen by the Bible, all of life. My understanding of the meaning of God depends on my way of looking at this very table, at this very desk, at everything, at creation. The tragedy of religion is partly due to its isolation from life, as if God could be segregated. God has become an alibi for our conscience, for real faith. He has become a sort of after-life insurance policy.

Just as we are commanded to love man, we are also called upon to be sensitive to the grandeur of God's creation. We are infatuated with our great technological achievements; we have forgotten the mystery of being, of being alive. We have lost our sense of wonder, our sense of radical amazement at sheer being. We have forgotten the meaning of being human and the deep responsibility involved in just being alive. Shakespeare's Hamlet said: "To be or not to be, that is the question." But that is no problem. We all want to be. The real problem, biblically speaking, is *how to be* and *how not to be*; that is our challenge, and it is what makes the difference between the human and the animal. The animal also wants to be. For us, it is the problem of *how to be* and *how not to be*, on the levels of existence. Now, what is the meaning of God? The meaning of God is precisely the challenge of "how to be."

Excerpt from *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, January 1966

God In Search of Man

reflection by
Abraham Joshua Heschel

The minds are sick. The hearts are mad. Humanity is drunk with a sense of absolute sovereignty. Our pride is hurt by each other's arrogance. The dreadful predicament is not due to economic conflicts. It is due to a spiritual paralysis.

This is an age of suspicion, when most of us seem to live by the rule: Suspect thy neighbor as thyself. Such radical suspicion leads to despair of man's capacity to be free and to eventual surrender to demonic forces, surrender to idols of power, to the monsters of self-righteous ideologies.

What will save us is a revival of reverence for man, unmitigable indignation at acts of violence, burning compassion for all who are deprived, the wisdom of the heart. Before imputing guilt to others, let us examine our own failures.

Religion's task is to cultivate disgust for violence and lies, sensitivity to other people's suffering, the love of peace. God has a stake in the life of every man. He never exposes humanity to a challenge without giving humanity the power to face the challenge. Different are the languages of prayer, but the tears are the same. We have a vision in common of Him in whose compassion all men's prayers meet.

In the words of the prophet Malachi, "From the rising of the sun to its setting My name is great among the nations, in every place incense is offered to My name, and a pure offering; for My name is great among the nations." It seems to me that the prophet proclaims that men all over the world, though they confess different conceptions of God, are all really worshiping the One God, the Father of all men, though they may not even be aware of it.

What will save us? God, and our faith in man's relevance to God. Respect for each other's commitment, respect for each other's faith, is more than a political and social imperative. It is born of the insight that God is greater than religion, that faith is deeper than dogma.

It is customary to blame secular science and anti religious philosophy for the eclipse of religion in modern society. It would be more honest to blame religion for its own defeats. Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion-its message becomes meaningless.

To quote from classic rabbinic literature: "Pious men of all nations have a share in the world to come, and are promised the reward of eternal life. I call heaven and earth to witness that the Holy Spirit rests upon each person, Jew or gentile, man or woman, master or slave, in consonance with his deeds."

God's voice speaks in many languages, communicating itself in a diversity of intuitions. The word of God never comes to an end. No word is God's last word.

Man's most precious thought is God, but God's most precious thought is man.

Source: God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism, Abraham Joshua Heschel

10 Struggles for Our Future

An article about 10 major faith and church struggles for our age as developed by OMI priest, Ron Rolheiser. As we begin a new year it might be worth our while to ponder these points.

1. A struggle with the atheism of our everyday consciousness in a world caught up with materialism. This is a very strong narcotic that places us at the center of our universe rather than God. So, how do we combat the atheism of our everyday consciousness? It requires us to be purposely mindful of all we have and not fall into the trap of seeing ourselves as the center of our universe.

2. A struggle to live in torn, divided and highly polarized communities to become healers and peacemakers even though we are wounded ourselves. How do we become healers and peace makers when we too are wounded in a divided world? In the Prayer of St Francis he asks God to help him sow unity when there is division first by seeing the whole cloth of creation as one and envisioning us being part of the process where the torn edges are joined together by finding a common thread of hope to bind all.

3. A struggle to live, love and forgive beyond the infectious ideologies we daily breathe. We need to be neither liberal nor conservative but rather a people of true compassion. Going beyond ideologies is a difficult challenge for they tend to define who we are. We find those of opposing positions as detrimental to a process of forgiveness. Yet we are asked to be compassionate, to walk a mile in the shoes of the other to begin to understand others and treat them as we wish to be treated.

4. A struggle for a healthy sexuality that is both chaste and passionate. A healthy sexuality in a society that on one hand glorifies rampant sexuality or denigrate the sexuality of individuals through ostracism, mutilation and death demands we stand for justice. None are slaves to the sexual desires of others nor should they become victims of brutal misogyny.

5. A struggle for interiority and prayer in a culture that promotes a virtual conspiracy against depth and serenity. We as a society have also become afraid of silence. We play music through buildings, headphones, telephones and computers to insulate ourselves from those around us and in doing so deafen ourselves to what God may be telling us. Begin today taking even five minutes to just sit in a quiet place and do nothing more than breathe and relax. It's harder than you think for our first concern is controlling the time we spend, then concerning ourselves with what needs to be done after this time is finished thus creating a cacophony in our minds. If nothing else simply allow yourself to be bathed in the silence of the moment, to be bathed in the simple knowledge that you are loved just the way you are even with all the distractions your mind creates.

6. A struggle to cope with personal grandiosity, ambition and pathological restlessness in a culture which nurtures immediate and ongoing gratification. We also find ourselves in a society that creates expectations for personal success regardless of the cost to ourselves and others. We are no better than our next sale, next take over, the next whatever. We demand cheaper goods and services regardless of the cost to human lives in our country or other nations so we can become sated. We find, however, that we are never sated and we bemoan the fact that we have become a debtor nation on the backs of the poor. Let us explore our hunger for more and demand justice for others in how we comport ourselves.

7. A struggle to not be motivated by paranoia, fear, narrowness and over protectionism in the face of terrorism and overpowering complexity, to not let the need for clarity and security trump compassion and truth. This struggle is a result of our need to control what we think is ours. Look at the birds of the air, the lilies of the fields, Jesus told us, your Father is always mindful of them. Then he takes an even broader step by telling us to share what we have with generosity. By doing that we can begin to escape a rampant paranoia that we won't have enough for we will encourage the generosity of others. Yes, the problems are complex but it is better to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick and injured with compassion and thus built trust in a world that only sees war.

8. A struggle with moral loneliness inside a religious, cultural, political and moral dispersed society; to find a soul mate who is there with us at our deepest level. Is there anyone out there who believes, feels and wants to make change happen? Are the rules of religion, culture, politics such that we turned off and dissuaded from finding others with whom we can share our lives?

9. A struggle to link faith to justice, ecology and gender and to get a letter of reference from the poor. Like all of the struggles noted before, we must find ways to balance all by not placing ourselves as the center of the world. Justice can happen when we are willing to make a commitment to it. Our world ecology will not wither if we are willing to take steps to change our expectations and curb our demands on its bounty. Gender will cease to be a barrier when we value each individual as God's special creation. Trappist monk Fr Louis, aka Thomas Merton, had a mystical experience on the streets of Nashville on the rare visit he made to his physician's office. Standing there on a street corner he saw all around him radiating a brilliance that could only be God's presence hidden in their lives. He mused that if everyone could have seen this there would be no more wars, hatred or fear yet there would also be an unhealthy desire to bow in worship to one another and not the God who is present among us.

10. A struggle for community and church to find the healthy line between individuality and community, spirituality and religiosity, to be both mature and committed, spiritual and church to one another. Western culture has focused on the importance of the individual to the exclusion of the importance of the community. When faced with a tribal culture, western concepts of individuality could not and cannot grasp what this means in the lives of billions in the world. We need to learn to listen more to one another and see ourselves not as loners but part of a whole where the good of the individual is as important as the good of the whole community, where there is a synergy that must happen if we are to grow as God's people.

As we progress in the new year it might be good to keep these points in mind to determine how we as individuals can start to make a difference not just in our own lives but in the lives of those around us thereby beginning a change in the way the world operates. Impossible? I remember a song that was popular some years ago called High Hopes. It was about how the impossible can happen. An ant was toppling rubber tree plants that were massive in comparison to its diminutive size and a ram was butting a huge power dam to create a hole. Each was successful despite the enormity of the challenge. Emmanuel, God is with us, is what we need to be successful too for we have High Hopes that his kingdom will come because we are willing to struggle with the hard questions.

Getting Our Priorities Straight

In his book, *To Heal a Fractured World*, Sir. Rabbi Jonathan Sachs, *Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth* tells a story of the Second Lubavitcher Rebbe, the "Mitteler Rebbe," who was so intent on his studies that he failed to hear the cry of his baby son. His father, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, heard the crying and went down and took the baby in his arms until he went back to sleep. Then he went in to his son, still intent on his books, and said, "My son, I do not know what you are studying, but it is not the study of Torah if it makes you deaf to the cry of a child." (As told to me by Rabbi Jennifer Feldman)

The "Mitteler Rebbe" got it backwards. First he should have attended to his crying child and then to the study of Torah. He had his *priorities backwards* and because of this, he missed point of Torah and Judaism entirely. Rosh Hashanah is all about learning how to get our priorities straight; discovering what demands our attention first and foremost and what can wait. We often think about Rosh Hashanah as a holiday of reflection leading to improving our relationships with others. A holiday in which teshuva is defined in terms of repentance and forgiveness. But on Rosh Hashanah we also say: *Hayom Harat Olam*, Today is the birthday of the world. Today is the day when we celebrate God's creation. And what was God's creation all about? Bringing order to the world.

If we look back at the creation narrative in Genesis we see that Creation Story is all about making order out of chaos. The second verse in the Torah tells us that the earth was *Tohu Va Vohu*, literally a land of "desert waste" and goes onto explain the way that God ordered and organized the world out of that Chaos. In that sense Rosh Hashanah celebrates the creation of order out of chaos and reminds us that as we attempt to create our own lives anew, one of our primary responsibilities is striving to ensure that our priorities are in order. Are we living our lives in accordance with our values and our beliefs? How have our priorities changed over the past year and how have they stayed the same? This is how we examine our purpose in life. This is how we understand the meaning of our own creation. These are the types of questions that Rosh Hashanah invites us to explore.

But we cannot answer these types of questions unless we first have a healthy understanding of ourselves, and of where we are in our lives.

Abraham Joshua Heschel told the following story:

There was a school boy who was forgetful. He was always losing things. So he worked out a system. Before he went to sleep at night he made out a list of all the things he would need the next day. He wrote: My suit is on the chair. My hat is in the closet. My books are on the desk. My shoes are under the chair. And I am in the bed.

He woke up the next morning and started to collect his things. They were all in the right places. The suit was on the chair. The books were on the desk. The shoes were under the chair. Then he came to the last item on his list. He went to look for himself in the bed but the search was in vain. He wasn't there.

"Where am I?" he asked. (Rabbi Jack Riemer, *World of the High Holidays*)

Where are you? This is actually the first question that is asked in the Torah. After the creation of the world, when God is looking for Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, God calls out to Adam: "Ayeka?" Where are you? **Where are you?** That is the first question of the creation story and the first question that we are to ask ourselves as we begin the work of self-renewal and re-creation each year. We engage in teshuvah, literally "turning"— turning inwards as we attempt to get a glimpse of our true selves, and then turning outwards to get a glimpse at how we are living our lives.

Understanding who we are and where we are in life is no small task, especially in this day and age. Rabbi Hayim Herring writes that the twenty first century has brought with it a renewed sense of urgency over questions of meaning in our lives. This is particularly true given the economic challenges that our country has faced over the past few years which have forced us to reconsider and reevaluate many areas of our lives. It is these types of questions that we must grapple with as we seek to understand who we are and who we would like to become- questions such as:

- If I live in an age when I can get whatever I want, how do I decide what is ultimately important?
- If I can choose to be a part of any community, which one is more desirable for me to join?
- If I live in a world that is always “on,” how can I ensure that I do not lose my soul?
- If I live in a world where I can keep taking, do I have a responsibility to give something back?

So now this brings us back to the natural outgrowth of understanding who we are, and where we are in life: the evaluation of our priorities. In his book, *First Things First*, Steven Covey shares the following story:

There was an expert on time management who was speaking to a group of busy executives at a seminar. To make his point, he used an illustration. He took out a one-gallon wide-mouthed jar and put it on the table in front of him. Then he produced about a dozen fist-sized rocks and placed them carefully, one at a time, in the jar. When the jar was full to the top and no more rocks could fit inside, he asked: “Is this jar full?” Everyone in the class said: “Yes.” He said: “Really?” Then he reached under the table and pulled out a bucket of gravel. He dumped some of the gravel in and shook the jar, so that the pieces of gravel worked themselves down into the crevices between the rocks. Then he asked the group again, “Is the jar full?” By this time, the class was onto him, so they said, “Probably not.” “Good!” he replied. And then he reached under the table and brought out a bucket of sand. He started putting the sand in and it quickly went into all the spaces that were left between the rocks. Then once more, he asked the question, “Is the jar full?” “No!” the students said. Again he said: “Good.” This time, he took a pitcher of water and began to pour it into the jar until the jar was full to the brim. Then he looked at the class and asked: “What do you think is the point of all this?” One eager beaver raised his hand and said, “The point is to teach us that no matter how full your schedule is, you can always fit something more in if you want to.” The speaker said, “No, that’s not the point at all. The truth that this illustration is meant to teach us is that if you don’t put the big rocks in first, you’ll never get them in at all.” (*What Are The Big Rocks in Your Jar?*)

Ask yourself: What are the big rocks in your life? What are the things that you really want to accomplish? Is it spending more time with your family? Is it finding more time to take on that hobby or project that you have been talking about for years? Is it making more time for yourself? Is it changing your work habits? Is it spending more time with your synagogue community? Is it working for a cause that you really believe in? These big rocks are frequently the things that require the most time, the most focus, the most care. Whatever it is, these questions about our values and our priorities remind us that if we forget to put in our big rocks first, we will never get them in at all.

Questions about priorities are not new to Judaism, they were not created in the twenty first century, nor were they meant to exist solely in times of economic crisis. These types of questions have been around for thousands of years. They are the questions of Rosh Hashanah— the questions necessary to celebrating the creation of the world, and exploring the creation of ourselves.

Perhaps the biggest challenge in re-discovering our identity, our values, and our priorities lies in the fact that the answers to these questions are meant to stay with us throughout the year.

Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk once put this question to his students: What was the hardest part of the *Akedah* for Abraham? Was it the initial call, the long walk to Moriah, or the binding? His answer: the hardest part was coming down the mountain.

Rabbi David Wolpe comments: the hardest part of the High Holiday experience comes: ...*two months later, when we are supposed to live by the promises we made*. And reminds us that: *We should treasure the summit of inspiration, but not live by it. Here below, once we have come down the mountain, our task awaits* (Rabbi David Wolpe, Elkins, RH Readings). 7

On Rosh Hashanah we must ask ourselves whether or not we are living out our deepest held convictions and values. We must explore whether or not our priorities are in the proper order. That is how we celebrate the creation of God's world, by getting in touch with the parts of ourselves that are made *betzelem elohim*, in God's image. *And then, once Rosh Hashanah is over and we have come down the mountain*, we must continually work to ensure that we are living up to our self discovery, always remembering that the work of creating our own selves is a life-long endeavor.

Shanah Tovah U'metukah, May this be a good and sweet New Year for all of us and may we all be inscribed in the Book of Life.

<http://torat-el.org>