
Theological Affinities in the Writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King, Jr.*

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The photograph of Abraham Joshua Heschel walking arm in arm with Martin Luther King, Jr. in the front row of marchers at Selma has become an icon of American Jewish life, and of Black-Jewish relations. Reprinted in Jewish textbooks, synagogue bulletins, and in studies of ecumenical relations, the picture has come to symbolize the great moment of symbiosis of the two communities, Black and Jewish, which today seems shattered. When Jesse Jackson, Andrew Young, Henry Gates, or Cornel West speak of the relationship between Blacks and Jews as it might be, and as they wish it would become, they invoke the moments when Rabbi Heschel and Dr. King marched arm in arm at Selma, prayed together in protest at Arlington National Cemetery, and stood side by side in the pulpit of Riverside Church.

The relationship between the two men began in January 1963, and was a genuine friendship of affection as well as a relationship of two colleagues working together in political causes. As King encouraged Heschel's involvement in the Civil Rights movement, Heschel encouraged King to take a public stance against the war in Vietnam. When the Conservative rabbis of America gathered in 1968 to celebrate Heschel's sixtieth birthday, the keynote speaker they invited was King. Ten days later, when King was assassinated, Heschel was the rabbi Mrs. King invited to speak at his funeral.

What is considered so remarkable about their relationship is the incongruity of Heschel, a refugee from Hitler's Europe who was born into a Hasidic rebbe's family in Warsaw, with a long white beard and yarmulke, involving himself in the cause of Civil Rights. Today, looking back from a generation more accustomed to African-American leaders such as Louis Farrakhan, King's closeness to Heschel seems beyond belief. What drew the two men together? What formed the basis of their close friendship?

A comparison of King and Heschel reveals theological affinities in addition to shared political sympathies. The preference King gave to the Exodus motif over the figure of Jesus certainly played a major role in linking the two men intellectually and religiously; for Heschel, the primacy of the Exodus in the Civil Rights movement was a major step in the history of Christian-Jewish relations. Heschel's concept of divine pathos, a category central to his theology, is mirrored in King's understanding of the nature of God's involvement with humanity. For both, the theological was intimately intertwined with the political and that conviction provided the basis of the spiritual affinity they felt for each other.

The bond between Heschel and King was a religious bond nurtured by the surprising spiritual connections informing their understanding of the Bible. Here was a Jewish theologian, born and raised in Warsaw to a distinguished family of religious leaders within the unworldly, deeply pietistic environment of East European Hasidim, who joined with a minister from the theologically conservative, pietistic African-American Church. Both had left the worlds of their family as young men, Heschel to study at the Reform movement's rabbinical seminary in Berlin, while completing his doctorate in philosophy at the University of Berlin, King to study for the ministry at the liberal Protestant Crozer Theological Seminary, then complete his doctorate at Boston University. Heschel's exposure to Christian thought came during the 1930s in Germany, at a time when Protestant theologians were debating whether to eliminate the Old Testament and declare Jesus an Aryan, in order to modify Christian theology to accommodate the Nazi regime.¹ King's exposure to Judaism was undoubtedly limited during his childhood years, and the Protestant theological tradition he studied had not yet rid itself of the anti-Jewish bias permeating its view of Jesus and the Hebrew Bible. Given that context, it is striking to read King's unusually positive depiction of the relationship between Jesus and Judaism in a student essay he wrote at Crozer Seminary in 1949: "Jesus was a Jew. It is impossible to understand Jesus outside of the race in which he was born. The Christian Church has tended to overlook its Judaic origins, but the fact is that Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew of Palestine. He shared the experiences of his fellow-countrymen. So as we study Jesus we are wholly in a Jewish atmosphere. . . . There is no justification of the view that Jesus was attempting to find a church distinct from the Synagogue. The gospels themselves bear little trace of such a view. Throughout the gospels we find Jesus accepting both the Temple and the Synagogue."² Heschel's evaluation of Christianity reflected a similarly posi-

tive affirmation. In a 1964 address, he wrote that Jews “ought to acknowledge the eminent role and part of Christianity in God’s design for the redemption of all men.”³

What linked Heschel and King theologically was their reading of the Bible, particularly of the prophets, and the understanding of God they drew from their biblical readings. Everything else grew out of that understanding: the nature of morality, of prayer, as well as the centrality of political commitments. The theological position of each is usually described in similar terms: the writings of Heschel and King are said to echo the neo-orthodox theological traditions represented by Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr, but also the liberal theological traditions expressed in historical-critical analyses of biblical texts and in social and political involvements of religious leaders. Whatever the influences of formal theological arguments, it is clear that each represents the spirit of his own religious tradition. King was shaped by the religious traditions of the Black church, while Heschel gave voice to the spiritual teachings of East European Hasidic piety, and for that reason the parallels between them are all the more interesting.

How did King manage to seize the imagination of America, to inspire and move to tears even the most secular among his followers, and to soften the hearts of so many of his opponents? King’s work has been identified as intellectual heir to Gandhi, Niebuhr, Anders Nygren, Paul Tillich, Henry Nelson Wieman, and Walter Rauschenbusch, but the powerful impact he achieved on his listeners was derived from the spiritual tradition of his church. Clayborne Carson, James Cone, and Keith Miller, among others, argue for the primacy of Black religiosity in shaping King, rather than his formal training in white theology. Cone writes, “The faith of the Black experience began to shape King’s idea of God during his childhood, and it remained central to his perspective throughout his life.”⁴ The religiosity prevalent in much of the Black church is supposed to transform the congregation; Miller, for example, notes: “In the experience of the ring shout, some slaves became, so to speak, their counterparts from the Bible.”⁵ Listening to a sermon or hymn could not occur without a response. Moreover, suffering was neither private nor inconsequential; by merging oneself with the biblical narrative, the Bible took on cosmic proportions. In Memphis, the night before he was assassinated, King described civil rights activists as the burning bush: “Bull Connor next would say, ‘Turn the firehoses on.’ And as I said to you the other night Bull Connor didn’t know history. He knew a kind of physics that somehow didn’t relate to the transphysics that we knew about, and that was the fact there was a certain kind of fire that no water could put out.”⁶

Yet as leader of the Civil Rights movement, King also departed from his church in significant ways, even while retaining its spiritual teachings, just as Heschel left his Hasidic milieu even while transmitting Hasidim’s teachings in the modern language of his theological writings.⁷ The relationship both had as adults to the religious communities of their childhoods was similar. For example, the attitude of the Black church toward the Civil Rights move-

ment was ambivalent. While urban churches became an early focal point of organizing activity, rural churches, as Charles Payne notes, were more reluctant to become involved: "Those who joined the movement in the early days ordinarily did so in defiance of their church leadership. Nonetheless, if the church as an organization did not lead people into the movement, the religiosity of the population may have been much more important."⁸ Some of the difference between urban and rural church communities may be attributed to the white patronage of Black churches in the rural South.⁹ Religion could serve as a force of political accommodation or of rebellion against the established order, and elements of the Black church allied themselves with each side. King, Carson notes, "fought an uphill struggle to transform the Black church into an institutional foundation for racial struggles."¹⁰ To accomplish that goal, King also carefully shaped the religious teachings he emphasized.¹¹

The revival of Jewish religiosity and social activism that Heschel promoted in his post-World War II career in the United States encountered similar ambivalences from the religious community in which he had been raised. Once he departed the pietistic, Hasidic world of his childhood for an academic career, he did not return. Just as the church as an institution did not lead African-Americans into the Civil Rights movement, Hasidism turned its members away from the political work Heschel led and he received no public support from Orthodox colleagues. Indeed, two of the leading Orthodox figures in postwar America, Norman Lamm and Joseph Soloveitchik, attacked him for his ecumenical work. Yet despite their opposition, it was the very religiosity of both many Jews and many African-Americans that inspired their political activism and the nature of the political stances they took.

The affinities between King and Heschel emerge in the language they used to explain their political positions, but even more unexpectedly in the religious mood they evoked through their religious language. There are three themes that are shared by Heschel and King. First and most striking is the commonality between the spirituality taught by Heschel and King, rooted in the emphasis King gave to the Hebrew Bible and the Exodus narrative and in Heschel's emphasis on the prophets. King and Heschel return their political activities to the biblical narrative. King's comparison of what is occurring in Alabama with the Exodus from Egypt, for instance, is not simply a politically astute use of a biblical story, but an effort to transfigure the participants into the biblical realm, in which actions have consequences for the divine plan of history. Political activism is not simply history, but *Heilsgeschichte*, salvation history occurring within the realm of God. That same tone is found in Heschel's political writings, in which he transfers the questions of the day into a biblical schema, so that they are occurring not only on a human plane, but within the life of God as well, in a tradition well-established within the Jewish mystical tradition.

Second, permeating King's words, the responses of his listeners, and the hymns of the movement, is a fundamental assumption of divine concern with

the events that are transpiring in the Civil Rights struggle. God is involved and engaged in that struggle, because God is not remote and transcendent, but possesses subjectivity and is affected by the treatment human beings accord one another. That conviction is central to Heschel's major theological claim, that the God of the Bible is not impassive, but is a God of pathos who responds to human deeds, suffering with us. The idea of a divine responsiveness to human activity is central to Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical tradition, but in reference solely to commandments between humans and God. Heschel expanded the tradition, as Arthur Green has recently pointed out, to include the ethical commandments regulating behavior between human beings. When I injure a fellow human being, Heschel wrote, I injure God. Similarly, the good deeds performed by human beings give strength to God. Green explains that "the urgency and cosmic vitality the Kabbalists associated with religious action was re-assimilated [by Heschel] to the religion of the Biblical prophets and the absolute demands they made for justice, care for the needy, and compassion for a God who ultimately depends upon man to do His bidding."¹²

Third, King speaks not as an observer of society, but as a spokesperson for God, conveying a divine perspective. He is never simply a messenger; his words carry an urgency that indicate his own deep engagement as a person standing in the presence of God. Such a stance is precisely what characterizes the nature of the prophet, Heschel argues. It is not simply the message of the prophets that the Bible wishes to convey, according to Heschel, but the prophet's own subjectivity and religious consciousness. To understand the nature of prophecy it is crucial to understand the nature of the prophet.

While it has long been recognized that King spoke within the biblical narrative, there has not been a consensus regarding within which narrative he should be understood. Two of the most important books about King that were published during the 1980s each identified him with a different Bible: *Parting the Waters*, by Taylor Branch, saw King primarily as the Hebrew Bible's Moses, liberating his Israelites; *Bearing the Cross*, by David Garrow, evoked the image of the New Testament Christ, viewing King as a Jesus figure of vicarious and redemptive suffering. Garrow remains insistent on what he views as King's emphasis upon Christianity and Jesus, and Vincent Harding identifies Black Power with the "autonomous action" of the Old Testament, whereas King's efforts reflect the "demonstration of power in weakness" of the New.¹³ It is not surprising, of course, that King speaks of himself as a Christian preacher or urges his audience, "Let us be Christian in all of our action." On the other hand, the story of the Civil Rights movement is not the story of Jesus, nor are any of his teachings invoked as central guideposts. Instead, the dominant narrative is the Exodus, and the most important single verse from the Bible is taken from Amos. The Christian theologian H. Richard Niebuhr explains, "In distinction from the Book of Amos and from most of the other prophets Jesus does not address the strong and influential in the community, demanding of them that they do justice to the poor; he directs his address to the latter. Hence there are no such injunctions to turn

from oppression of the poor as we find in Amos.”¹⁴ While King referred often to the figure of Jesus in his sermons, his most important public addresses rarely mention him, turning much more frequently to Moses and the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. That is not unexpected; Lawrence Levine, among others, has noted the centrality of Moses and the Old Testament in Black slave religion, interpreting the story as a proto-theology of liberation.¹⁵ The story of the Exodus became the leitmotif of the Civil Rights movement, with the South identified as Egypt, Blacks as the Children of Israel, and King as Moses.¹⁶ This continued an earlier tradition; Malinda Snow notes, “In the story of the children of Israel in Egypt, . . . [slaves] discovered the central type of their experience, which prefigured their own deliverance from slavery. They merged biblical and contemporary time.”¹⁷ Still, King’s sometimes deliberate shift from Jesus to Moses or one of the biblical prophets is striking in a Christian preacher, from whom we might expect greater stress on the figure of Jesus as the liberator. For example, in “The Negro and the Constitution,” written in 1944 when he was fifteen, he concludes, “We cannot be truly Christian people so long as we flaunt the central teachings of Jesus: brotherly love and the Golden Rule. . . . My heart throbs anew in the hope that inspired by the examples of Lincoln, imbued with the spirit of Christ, [Americans] will cast down the last barrier to perfect freedom.” Nearly twenty years later, in his famous speech, “I Have a Dream,” modeled, as Keith Miller and Emily Lewis argue,¹⁸ after the rhetorical scheme and thematic substance of “The Negro and the Constitution,” King shifts from the New Testament to the Hebrew Bible, supplanting Jesus with Amos and Isaiah: “No, we . . . will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

That particular verse, Amos 5:24, became a kind of anthem of the movement, cited frequently by King and engraved at his memorial in Atlanta. It is worth noting that the translation King used does not appear in the standard translations of the Bible used by Christian theologians, the King James Bible and the Revised Standard Version, but is identical to Heschel’s own translation in his study, *The Prophets*, published in 1962, a book that was widely read by civil rights leaders. Let us compare:

King James Bible: “But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream”

Revised Standard Version: “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream”

Jewish Publication Society: “But let justice well up like water, righteousness like an unfailing stream”

Heschel’s translation: “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.”¹⁹

Heschel’s study of the prophets, which originated as his doctoral dissertation at the University of Berlin, completed in 1933, brought a new direction

to biblical studies. Beginning with Martin Luther, Protestant scholars had seen the prophets as interpreters of the law of Moses. By the mid-nineteenth century, the message of the prophets was detached from the law by Christian commentators, and prophetic religion was viewed as the priestly and rabbinic legalistic religion of Judaism. Jesus, it was argued, was heir to the prophets, whereas Judaism represented a degenerate religion that had forsaken the prophetic teachings. Throughout the literature of European biblical scholarship until the post-World War II era there is little mention of the social critique formulated by the prophets. Under the influence of the History of Religions school that took shape in Germany during the first decades of this century, biblical scholars revived an old tradition of interpreting prophecy as “ecstatic.” That view diminished the significance of the prophet’s actual words by viewing the prophet as speaking while under a kind of trance. The implication was that the prophet was so transfixed by the experience that he or she did not fully comprehend what he or she was saying. The originality of the prophets also tended to be diminished in German biblical circles. Gerhard von Rad, one of the most influential twentieth-century interpreters of the prophets, placed the prophets within the context of ancient Near Eastern traditions, explaining, “Now once that is granted, any definition of the prophet as a brilliant religious personality, standing close to God, falls to the ground. So, too, does the whole concept of ‘prophetic religion,’ which was set up as a spiritual counter-balance to the priestly religion of the cult.”²⁰

American Protestant traditions, by contrast, had long identified biblical religion with commitment to political protest and social activism. The social gospel movement, associated primarily with the theologians such as Walter Rauschenbusch, Howard Thurman, and Harry Emerson Fosdick, articulated the social concern of the prophets and presented it as central to the biblical message, and their influence on King is clear. Their impact on biblical scholarship, however, began only much later. Yet while King ultimately came to present the prophets as great social critics, in line with the social gospel traditions, his earliest writings from his student years described them otherwise. For instance, in a paper on Jeremiah, written in 1948 when he had just entered Crozer Seminary, King presented him the prophet primarily as a critic of religion, not of society.²¹

From the outset of his career, Heschel emphasized the social critique of the prophets, in striking contrast to the prevailing biblical scholarship in Germany, where he completed his doctoral dissertation in 1933 on “Prophetic Consciousness.” Published in 1935 as a book in German, his study was later expanded and appeared in English in 1962, at the same time he began his engagement in political work. Heschel’s achievement was to bring to the fore the centrality of the prophetic critique of social injustice without neglecting the religious experience underlying their passions. He writes, for example: “We and the prophet have no language in common. To us the moral state of society, for all its stains and spots, seems fair and trim; to the prophet it is dreadful. So many deeds of charity are done, so much decency radiates day

and night; yet to the prophet satiety of the conscience is prudery and flight from responsibility. Our standards are modest; our sense of injustice tolerable, timid; our moral indignation impermanent; yet human violence is interminable, unbearable, permanent. . . . The prophet's ear perceives the silent sigh."²² His central category of divine pathos was derived from Hasidic thought and constituted his modernized version of the traditional kabbalistic term, *zoreh gavoha*, divine need.

The primacy of the Exodus and the prophets and the relative absence of references to Jesus lent the Civil Rights movement an ecumenical, and even a philosemitic image in the eyes of major segments of the Jewish community. Heschel, for example, was particularly touched during the march from Selma to Montgomery by King's references to the Exodus in his sermon, describing three types among the Israelites who left Egypt and he viewed King's choice of the Exodus over Jesus as a significant moment in Christian-Jewish relations. Shortly after returning from the march, he wrote to King: "The day we marched together out of Selma was a day of sanctification. That day I hope will never be past to me—that day will continue to be this day. A great Hasidic sage compares the service of God to a battle being waged in war. An army consists of infantry, artillery, and cavalry. In critical moments cavalry and artillery may step aside from the battle-front. Infantry, however, carries the brunt. I am glad to belong to infantry! May I add that I have rarely in my life been privileged to hear a sermon as glorious as the one you delivered at the service in Selma prior to the march."²³ For Heschel, the march had spiritual significance; he felt, he wrote, "as though my legs were praying."

For Heschel, the centrality of the Exodus in the Civil Rights movement was a sign of Christian theological affirmation of its Jewish roots, an issue he considered pivotal to the contemporary ecumenical efforts in which he was involved. The Second Vatican Council, which met from 1961 to 1965, promulgated its statement concerning the Jews, *Nostra Aetate*, on October 28, 1965. Heschel was consulted on numerous occasions by leaders of the Council, including Cardinal Bea and Pope Paul VI, and he considered its work of great importance. Believing that King's use of the Exodus would be strengthened if he were to participate in a Passover celebration, Heschel invited King and his wife to his family's seder, to take place on April 16, 1968: "The ritual and the celebration of that evening seek to make present to us the spirit and the wonder of the exodus from Egypt. It is my feeling that your participation at a Seder celebration would be of very great significance." King was assassinated just days before Passover.

Selma was a major event in Heschel's life. A few days before the march was able to take place, in mid-March 1965, Heschel led a delegation of eight hundred people protesting the brutal treatment the demonstrators were receiving in Selma to FBI headquarters in New York City. There had been violence against the demonstrators in Selma, and they had been prevented for two months from beginning to march. The New York delegation was not permitted to enter the FBI building, but Heschel was allowed inside, sur-

rounded by sixty police officers, to present a petition to the regional FBI director. On Friday, March 19, two days before the Selma march was scheduled to begin, Heschel received a telegram from King, inviting him to join the marchers in Selma. Heschel flew to Selma from New York on Saturday night and was welcomed as one of the leaders into the front row of marchers, with King, Ralph Bunche, and Ralph Abernathy. Each of them wore flower leis, brought by Hawaiian delegates. In an unpublished memoir he wrote upon returning from Selma, Heschel described the extreme hostility he encountered from whites in Alabama that week, from the moment he arrived at the airport, and the kindness he was shown by Dr. King's assistants, particularly Rev. Andrew Young, who hovered over him during the march with great concern.

Upon his return, Heschel described his experience in a diary entry: "I thought of having walked with Hasidic rabbis on various occasions. I felt a sense of the Holy in what I was doing. Dr. King expressed several times to me his appreciation. He said, 'I cannot tell you how much your presence means to us. You cannot imagine how often Reverend [C.T.] Vivian and I speak about you.' Dr. King said to me that this was the greatest day in his life and the most important civil rights demonstration. . . . I felt again what I have been thinking about for years—that Jewish religious institutions have again missed a great opportunity, namely, to interpret a civil-rights movement in terms of Judaism. The vast majority of Jews participating actively in it are totally unaware of what the movement means in terms of the prophetic traditions."²⁴ Just before the march began, a service was held in a chapel, where he read Psalm 27, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?"²⁵ Heschel's presence in the front row of marchers was a visual symbol of religious Jewish commitment to Civil Rights, and "stirred not only the Jewish religious community but Jews young and old into direct action, galvanizing the whole spectrum of activists from fund-raisers to lawyers."²⁶ Not everyone reacted as positively to the marchers; *The New York Times* carried a report that Republican Representative William L. Dickinson asserted that the march was a communist plot, and that "drunkenness and sex orgies were the order of the day."²⁷

King's identification of the movement with the Exodus drew on a long tradition in Black slave religion and the Black church, in which the most significant biblical figure was Moses. In spirituals and sermons, Moses was described as the liberator from Egypt rather than the lawgiver at Sinai, and Jesus, viewed as a figure of suffering, tended to be merged with Moses. At best, Jesus was a derivatory figure whose purpose and significance were not original, but derived from the prophets, in a theological tradition stemming from Rauschenbusch.²⁸ The identification of the movement with the Exodus continued in King's work, Keith Miller makes clear, in sermons and in formal addresses such as "I See the Promised Land," which he delivered in Memphis the night before he was assassinated, to a group of striking Black sanitation workers. In that speech, King merges his listeners, but also all civil rights

activists, with the Israelite slaves under Pharaoh: "You know, whenever Pharaoh wanted to prolong the period of slavery in Egypt. . . . He kept the slaves fighting among themselves. . . . When the slaves get together, that's the beginning of getting out of slavery. Now let us maintain unity."²⁹

Heschel used similar imagery when writing about civil rights, but he used the imagery to rebuke white audiences for their racism. American Jews, too, were Egyptians, in Heschel's retelling. At his first major address on the subject, at a conference on Religion and Race sponsored by the National Conference of Christians and Jews in Chicago on January 14, 1963, the occasion where Heschel and King first met, Heschel opened his speech by returning the present day to biblical history: "At the first conference on religion and race, the main participants were Pharaoh and Moses. . . . The outcome of that summit meeting has not come to an end. 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."³⁰ In February 1964, at another conference, held at a time when white resistance in America was increasing, Heschel reminded his audiences that Israelites, just after leaving Egypt, had complained of the bitter water they found at Marah, asking Moses, "What shall we drink?" Chiding his audience, Heschel writes:

This episode seems shocking. What a comedown! Only three days earlier they had reached the highest peak of prophetic and spiritual exaltation, and now they complain about such a prosaic and unspiritual item as water. . . . The Negroes of America behave just like the children of Israel. Only in 1963 they experienced the miracle of having turned the tide of history, the joy of finding millions of Americans involved in the struggle for civil rights, the exaltation of the fellowship, the March to Washington. Now only a few months later they have the audacity to murmur: "What shall we drink? We want adequate education, decent housing, proper employment." How ordinary, how unpoetic, how annoying! . . . We are ready to applaud dramatic struggles once a year in Washington. For the sake of lofty principles we will spend a day or two in jail somewhere in Alabama. . . . The tragedy of Pharaoh was the failure to realize that the exodus from slavery could have spelled redemption for both Israel and Egypt. Would that Pharaoh and the Egyptians had joined the israelites in the desert and together stood at the foot of Sinai!³¹

Few in the Jewish community have achieved the moral stature of Heschel, able to chastise American Jews in a prophetic voice for their racism. During his lifetime, many in the community were openly critical of Heschel, arguing that he had established himself as a leader without having been selected. He had no right to speak to the Vatican on behalf of Jewry, many claimed, as if he spoke on behalf of other Jews. At the same time, Heschel quickly was recognized on the national level as a major voice in the Civil Rights struggle. For example, when President John F. Kennedy wanted to convene religious

leaders to discuss Civil Rights at a meeting at the White House in June 1963, Heschel was one of those invited to attend. In response to Kennedy's telegram inviting him to the meeting, Heschel telegraphed:

I look forward to privilege of being present at meeting tomorrow four pm. Likelihood exists that Negro problem will be like the weather. Everybody talks about it but nobody does anything about it. Please demand of religious leaders personal involvement not just solemn declaration. We forfeit the right to worship God as long as we continue to humiliate Negroes. Church synagogue have failed. They must repent. Ask of religious leaders to call for national repentance and personal sacrifice. Let religious leaders donate one month's salary toward fund for Negro housing and education. I propose that you Mr. President declare state of moral emergency. A Marshall plan for aid to Negroes is becoming a necessity. The hour calls for moral grandeur and spiritual audacity.³²

Both Heschel and King have been viewed as falling under the influence of the two most important theological tendencies of the century, the neo-orthodoxy associated with Barth and Niebuhr, and the liberal trends known either as ethical monotheism within the Jewish tradition, or as culture Protestantism within Christian tradition. Both saw the limitations of each tradition, suspicious of Barth's assertion of God's utter and complete transcendent otherness, according to which human beings are unable to affect the divine realm, while at the same time uncomfortable with liberalism's diminution of divine power and action within the world and with what they saw as its naive optimism regarding human history, yet at the same time as other than the worldly realm. For both, God has a subjective life that is affected by human deeds; human beings constitute an object of divine concern.

Heschel developed a theology of what he termed "divine pathos" that he claimed was rooted in the teachings of the biblical prophets. In the experience of the prophets, God was not remote, nor simply a commanding force that expects obedience. Rather, God responds to human beings "in an intimate and subjective manner," experiencing "joy or sorrow, pleasure or wrath." Humanity and God do not inhabit detached realms, because God "has a stake in the human situation. . . . Man is not only an image of God; he is a perpetual concern of God."³³ Central to the prophets is the conviction that "the attitudes of man may affect the life of God, that God stands in an intimate relationship to the world."³⁴ Such a theology, by assuming that a dynamic encounter between human beings and God is possible, testifies to some degree of analogy between God and people, thereby elevating the mortal significance of human life. Divine pathos, as Heschel defines it, bears the religious implication "that God can be intimately affected" and the political implication that "God is never neutral, never beyond good and evil."³⁵

King's own dissatisfaction with theological liberalism's understanding of the nature of God was clear, beginning in his student writings. In his dissertation on Tillich and Wieman he criticized the impersonality of God charac-

teristic of both theologians' work. Commentators have stressed King's affirmation of neo-orthodoxy's contention that God acts in history, as well as his rejection of the essentially passive role of human beings in neo-orthodox theology. James McClendon has commented, "Man on his own loses his way, grows weary, discouraged, while passive dependence on God alone is disobedience to God."³⁶ The pathos of God is not described or argued by King in the same language that Heschel uses, but is invoked in the images of his language. Indeed, essential to the power of King's words is the implication that God has compassion for human beings and is sympathetic to human suffering. During the Montgomery boycott, he declared, "God is using Montgomery as His proving ground," assuring his followers, "Remember, if I am stopped, this movement will not stop because God is with the movement." Later, in 1968, he said, "It is possible for me to falter, but I am profoundly secure in my knowledge that God loves us; He has not worked out a design for our failure." God's involvement in the struggle was an important component in solidifying the identity of the movement with biblical *Heilsgeschichte*.

According to Heschel's theology, human history is God's history, too, because, as he entitled one of his books, "man is not alone." King used similar language in *Strength to Love*: "However dismal and catastrophic may be the present circumstances, we know that we are not alone, for God dwells with us in life's most confining and oppressive cells."³⁷ In his doctoral dissertation, King had criticized Tillich for the impersonality of his God. The "ground of being," King wrote, was "little more than a sub-personal reservoir of power, somewhat akin to the impersonalism of Oriental Vedantism."³⁸ Heschel, in a television interview, used humor to describe Tillich: "One of the most popular definitions of God common in America today was developed by a great Protestant theologian: God is the ground of being. So everybody is ready to accept it. Why not? Ground of being causes me no harm. Let there be a ground of being, doesn't cause me any harm, and I'm ready to accept it. It's meaningless."³⁹ The absence of a commanding voice and of divine concern for human life, central in Heschel's view to the biblical message, renders Tillich's God unsatisfying.

Using language that is strikingly similar, both Heschel and King assert that God is not the "unmoved Mover" of the Aristotelian tradition, unconcerned with the joys and troubles of human life, but is, in fact, deeply affected by earthly affairs. King writes, "The God that we worship is not some Aristotelian 'unmoved mover' who merely contemplates upon Himself; He is not merely a self-knowing God, but an other-loving God Who forever works through history for the establishment of His kingdom."⁴⁰ Heschel used similar language, arguing that in Judaism, God is the "most moved Mover," responsive to human suffering and challenging us to respond to the divine initiative: "To be is to stand for, and what human beings stand for is the great mystery of being God's partner. God is in need of human beings."

God's need of human beings is a prominent tradition within classical Jewish mysticism. Human actions affect the divine realm, according to the mys-

tics, strengthening the forces of mercy or judgment within God, who responds in kind. The divine realm itself is dependent upon human actions, because God is understood to have gone into exile with the Jewish people, sending the divine presence to reside in the earthly realm. As much as human beings are in need of redemption, God too, awaits redemption and exists in a measure of dependence upon human deeds. King writes something similar: "By endowing us with freedom, God relinquished a measure of his own sovereignty and imposed certain limitations upon himself."⁴¹ Divine concern is an assumption that pervades the Black church. Lewis Baldwin writes, "The concept of a personal God of infinite love and undiluted power 'who works through history for the salvation of His children' has always been central to the theology of the Black Church."⁴²

Theologically as well as politically, King and Heschel recognized their own strong kinship. For each there was an emphatic stress on the dependence of the political on the spiritual, God on human society, the moral life on economic well-being. Indeed, there are numerous passages in their writings that might have been composed by either one. Consider for example, Heschel's words: "The opposite of good is not evil, the opposite of good is indifference," a conviction that he translated into a political commitment: "In a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible."⁴³ King writes, "To accept passively an unjust system is to cooperate with that system." In so doing, he went on, "the oppressed becomes as evil as the oppressor." Not to act communicates "to the oppressor that his actions are morally right." Social activism was required by religious faith, both Heschel and King argued, particularly when society had developed immoral institutional structures: "Your highest loyalty is to God and not to the mores, or folkways, the state or the nation or any man-made institution."⁴⁴

Their common understanding of the prophets and of the connections between faith and political engagement was the motivation that brought both men to speak out against the war in Vietnam, despite the political consequences. Heschel was the founder, together with Richard John Neuhaus and John Bennett, of an anti-war organization, known as Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam, which he established in the fall of 1965.⁴⁵ Even as social protest was for him a religious experience, religion without indignation at political evils was also impossible: "To speak about God and remain silent on Vietnam is blasphemous," he wrote. Over and over, in speeches at universities, synagogues, and anti-war rallies, he denounced the murder of innocent people in Southeast Asia. However difficult it may be to stop the war today, he said, it will be even more difficult tomorrow; the killing must end now.

Whether or not Dr. King should speak out publicly against the war in Vietnam was a topic that preoccupied Heschel during the years between 1965 and 1967. Would his public opposition to the war hurt the Civil Rights movement? Which was the better political course, and which was the greater moral good? Lacking widespread support even within the SCLC for a public position against the war, King came under severe attack for his opposition. Major news-

papers within both the Black and white communities editorialized against him, and civil rights leaders including Ralph Bunche, Whitney Young, Roy Wilkins, Jackie Robinson and Senator Edward Brooke publicly criticized him.⁴⁶

Heschel remained deeply engaged in anti-war efforts during the last years of his life. He lectured frequently at anti-war rallies, and made his opposition to the war an integral part of his public lectures and of his classes at the Jewish Theological Seminary, where he served as Professor of Jewish Ethics and Mysticism in the Department of Philosophy. The atrocities committed by U.S. forces in Vietnam, and the obvious political futility of a war against guerrillas, were vigorously condemned by Heschel, who was placed under FBI surveillance; he was branded an anti-American subversive by supporters of the war. But the real subversiveness, Heschel stated, came from the policies of the American government:

Our thoughts on Vietnam are sores, destroying our trust, ruining our most cherished commitments with burdens of shame. We are pierced to the core with pain, and it is our duty as citizens to say no to the subversiveness of our government, which is ruining the values we cherish. . . . The blood we shed in Vietnam makes a mockery of all our proclamations, dedications, celebrations. Has our conscience become a fossil, is all mercy gone? If mercy, the mother of humility, is still alive as a demand, how can we say yes to our bringing agony to that tormented country? We are here because our own integrity as human beings is decaying in the agony and merciless killing done in our name. In a free society, some are guilty and all are responsible. We are here to call upon the governments of the United States as well as North Vietnam to stand still and to consider that no victory is worth the price of terror, which all parties commit in Vietnam, North and South. Remember that the blood of the innocent cries forever. Should that blood stop to cry, humanity would cease to be.⁴⁷

The crimes committed in Vietnam were destroying American values, and were also undermining our religious lives, he insisted. Someone may commit a crime now and teach mathematics an hour later. But when we pray, all we have done in our lives enters our prayers.⁴⁸ As he had articulated in his early essays of the 1940s, the purpose of prayer is not petitionary. We do not pray in order to be saved, Heschel stressed in his writings, we pray so that we might be worthy of being saved. Prayer should not focus on our wishes, but it is a moment in which God's intentions are reflected in us.⁴⁹ If we are created in the image of God, each human being should be a reminder of God's presence. If we engage in acts of violence and murder, we are desecrating the divine likeness.

King delivered a formal statement opposing the war in a major address sponsored by Clergy and Laymen Concerned, on April 4, 1967, in New York's Riverside Church. Echoing themes similar to those articulated by Heschel, he reminded his audience that the motto of the SCLC was "to save the soul of America," and stated, "If America's soul becomes totally poisoned,

part of the autopsy must read Vietnam. . . . A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."⁵⁰ He went on to call for a "revolution of values" in American society as the best defense against communism, and "to remove those conditions of poverty, insecurity and injustice which are the fertile soil in which the seed of communism grows and develops."

The anguish Heschel felt over the war in Vietnam was relentless and often left him unable to sleep or concentrate on other matters. Throughout those years, he received warnings and complaints from some members of the Jewish community, who felt his protests were endangering American government support for the State of Israel. Similarly, King was attacked for endangering President Lyndon Johnson's support for the Civil Rights movement, and his outspokenness against the war did not win approval from the major Black organizations. SNCC and CORE opposed the war, but the Urban League and the NAACP defended it. Whitney Young stated, "the greatest freedom that exists for Negroes . . . is the freedom to die in Vietnam."⁵¹

Both Heschel and King spoke of each other as prophets. On March 25, 1968, just ten days before he was assassinated, King delivered the keynote address at a birthday celebration honoring Heschel, convened by the Rabbinical Assembly of America, an umbrella organization of Conservative rabbis. In his introduction of King to the audience, Heschel asked, "Where in America today do we hear a voice like the voice of the prophets of Israel? Martin Luther King is a sign that God has not forsaken the United States of America. God has sent him to us. His presence is the hope of America. His mission is sacred, his leadership of supreme importance to every one of us." In his address, King stated that Heschel "is indeed a truly great prophet." He went on, "here and there we find those who refuse to remain silent behind the safe security of stained glass windows, and they are forever seeking to make the great ethical insights of our Judeo-Christian heritage relevant in this day and in this age. I feel that Rabbi Heschel is one of the persons who is relevant at all times, always standing with prophetic insights to guide us through these difficult days."⁵²

It is clear that their relationship carried profound meaning for both Heschel and King. They seem to have been aware of the symbolic significance of their friendship, and used it as a tool to foster further alliances between Jews and Blacks. Heschel worked on joint projects with Jesse Jackson and Wyatt T. Walker, among others, while many of King's closest advisors were Jews. The opposition of most Jewish organizations to affirmative actions programs, beginning in the 1970s, never won support from Heschel, who died in 1972, and it is likely he would have mediated the tensions arising from the Jewish community's hostility toward Andrew Young and Jesse Jackson that developed in the late 1970s and 1980s. Yet while Heschel gave his political support to a wide range of African-American leaders, it was the theological affinity he experienced with King that lent their relationship a particularly strong and profound intimacy.⁵³

Neither community today has voices of moral leadership comparable to the voices of King and Heschel. The prophetic mood they created has been replaced by voices of witness that speak about the racism and antisemitism of our society, but without offering the transcendent religious vision they provided. The moments of transcendence that predominated in the Civil Rights era have shifted to moods of cynicism. Perhaps if the memory of that era and the symbolism of the friendship between Heschel and King survives it will one day inspire the transformation that remains so badly needed.

NOTES

* This article is forthcoming in *Black Zion: African-American Religious Encounters with Judaism*, ed. Yvonne Chireau and Nathaniel Deutsch (New York: Oxford University Press).

1. Doris L. Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Susannah Heschel, "Nazifying Christian Theology: Walter Grundmann and the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life," *Church History*, 63, No. 4 (December 1994), pp. 587–605.

2. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Who Was Jesus of Nazareth?" in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson, Vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 245.

3. Abraham J. Heschel, "No Religion Is an Island," in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays of Abraham Joshua Heschel*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996), p. 242.

4. James Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991); cited by Michael Eric Dyson, *Reflecting Black: African-American Cultural Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 256.

5. Keith D. Miller, "Alabama as Egypt: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Religion of Slaves," in *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Sermonic Power of Public Discourse*, ed. Carolyn Calloway-Thomas and John Louis Lucaites (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), p. 21. For a discussion of influences of the Black church on King's thought, see Lewis Baldwin, *There Is a Balm in Gilead: The Cultural Roots of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1991) and Fred Downing, *To See the Promised Land: The Faith Pilgrimage of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986). For contrary interpretations that place King's intellectual development within the context of Rauschenbusch, Niebuhr, and Gandhi, see Kenneth Smith and Ira G. Zepp, *Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1974) and John J. Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Making of Mind* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 1983).

6. Cited by Michael Osborn, "The Last Mountaintop of Martin Luther King, Jr." in *Sermonic Power of Public Discourse*, ed. Calloway-Thomas and Lucaites, p. 153.

7. See Arthur Green, "Three Warsaw Mystics," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, Vol. 13 (1996), pp. 1–58.

8. Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, p. 272.

9. Hans A. Baer and Merrill Singer, *African-American Religion in the Twentieth Century: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), p. 39.

10. Clayborne Carson, "Rethinking African-American Political Thought in the Post-Revolutionary Era," in *The Making of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Brian Ward and Tony Badger (New York: NYU Press, 1996), p. 117.

11. David Garrow has warned that some of King's sermons and lectures were substantially revised before being published. Nonetheless, I am assuming that his writings published after 1957 remain valid expressions. David Garrow, "The Intellectual Development of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Influences and Commentaries," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 40 (Jan-

uary 1986): pp. 5–20; reprinted in *Native American Religion and Black Protestantism*, ed. Martin E. Marty (Munich: K. G. Saur, 1993), pp. 206–21.

12. Arthur Green, “Three Warsaw Mystics,” p. 48.

13. Ibid. See also Vincent Harding, “The Religion of Black Power” in *The Religious Situation*, ed. D. Cutler (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), pp. 3–38.

14. W. Beach and H. Richard Niebuhr, eds., *Christian Ethics* (New York: Ronald Press, 1955), p. 34; cited by Preston N. Williams, “James Cone and the Problem of a Black Ethic,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 65, No. 4 (October 1972), pp. 483–94; reprinted in *Native American Religion and Black Protestantism*, p. 280.

15. Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). See also Iain MacRobert, “The Black Roots of Pentecostalism,” in *African-American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture*, ed. Timony E. Fulop and Albert J. Raboteau (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 295–309.

16. See, for example, Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 71–81; idem. *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 23, 31, 89, 124, 170. I do not agree with the assertion of the primacy of Jesus over Moses in King’s writings by James H. Smylie, “On Jesus, Pharaohs, and the Chosen People: Martin Luther King as Biblical Interpreter and Humanist,” *Interpretation* 24 (January 1970), pp. 74–91.

17. Malinda Snow, “Martin Luther King’s ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail’ as Pauline Epistle,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 71 (1985), p. 319.

18. Keith D. Miller and Emily M. Lewis, “Touchstones, Authorities, and Marian Anderson: The Making of ‘I Have a Dream,’” in *The Making of Martin Luther King*, ed. Ward and Badger (New York: NYU Press, 1996), pp. 147–61.

19. Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 212 and passim.

20. Gerhard von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), pp. 13–14.

21. Clayborne Carson, ed., Vol. 1, pp. 181–95.

22. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 9.

23. Dated March 29, 1965.

24. Cited in Susannah Heschel, “Introduction,” *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996), pp. xxiii–xxiv.

25. He writes in an unpublished memoir that he had originally intended to read Psalm 15, “O Lord, who shall sojourn in thy tent?” but changed his mind after he arrived in Selma.

26. Murray Friedman with Peter Binzen, *What Went Wrong? The Creation and Collapse of the Black-Jewish Alliance* (New York: Free Press, 1995), p. 191.

27. *The New York Times*, March 22, 1965.

28. Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan, 1908).

29. Martin Luther King, Jr., “I See the Promised Land,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1986), pp. 280–281.

30. Abraham J. Heschel, “Religion and Race,” in *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), p. 85.

31. Abraham J. Heschel, “The White Man on Trial” in *The Insecurity of Freedom*, pp. 101–103.

32. The telegram from Kennedy was dated June 12, 1963: “At four o’clock on Monday, June 17, I am meeting with a group of religious leaders to discuss certain aspects of the nation’s civil rights problem. This matter merits serious and immediate attention and I would be pleased to have you attend the meeting to be held in the East Room of the White House. Please advise whether you will be able to attend. John F Kennedy”; Heschel’s reply was dated June 16, 1963.

33. Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 226.

34. Ibid., p 229.
35. Ibid., pp. 224, 231.
36. James McClendon, *Biography as Theology* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1974), pp. 80–86; cited by John H. Patton, “‘I Have a Dream’: The Performance of Theology Fused with the Power of Orality” in *The Sermonic Power of Public Discourse*, ed. Calloway-Thomas and Lucaites, p. 112.
37. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love*, p. 86.
38. King, CCG, dissertation, p. 271; cited by John J. Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Making of a Mind* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), p. 60.
39. Abraham J. Heschel, “Carl Stern’s Interview with Dr. Heschel,” in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p. 408.
40. 1957 Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom address at the Lincoln Memorial; quoted in Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.*, p. 47.
41. King, *Strength to Love*, p. 64.
42. Lewis V. Baldwin, “Martin Luther King, Jr., the Black Church, and the Black Messianic Vision,” in *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. David J. Garrow, 18 vols. (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1989), Vol. 1, p. 7.
43. Heschel used that phrase frequently; cf. “The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement,” in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p. 225, “A Prayer for Peace,” op. cit., p. 231.
44. King, *Strength to Love*, p. 128.
45. The name was changed in the late 1970s to Clergy and Laity Concerned.
46. Frederick J. Antczak, “When ‘Silence Is Betrayal’: An Ethical Criticism of the Revolution of Values in the Speech at Riverside Church,” in *The Sermonic Power of Public Discourse*, pp. 134–35.
47. Text reprinted in Susannah Heschel, “Introduction” in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p. xxiv. See also Robert McAfee Brown, Abraham J. Heschel and Michael Novak, *Vietnam: Crisis of Conscience* (New York: Association Press, 1967).
48. Abraham J. Heschel, “The Holy Dimension,” *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, pp. 318–27.
49. Abraham J. Heschel, “Prayer,” in Ibid., pp. 340–53.
50. Martin Luther King, Jr., “A Time to Break Silence,” *A Testament of Hope*, pp. 234, 241.
51. Adam Fairclough, “The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Second Reconstruction, 1957–1973,” *Southern Atlantic Quarterly* 80, No. 2 (Spring 1981), pp. 177–94; reprinted in *Native American Religion and Black Protestantism*, p. 200.
52. The texts of both speeches are reprinted in *A Testament of Hope*, pp. 657–79.
53. For their thoughtful comments and suggestions, I would like to thank my colleagues Jacob Aronson, Richard Cogley, and Constance Parvey.