

## [Abraham Joshua Heschel](#)

Philosophy, Theology and Interreligious Dialogue

Bearbeitet von  
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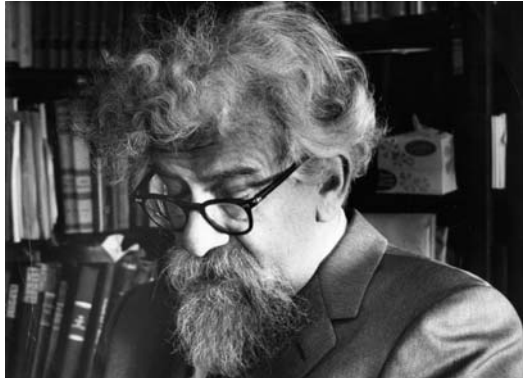
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# Abraham Joshua Heschel

Philosophy, Theology  
and Interreligious Dialogue

Edited by Stanisław Krajewski  
and Adam Lipszyc



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## Introduction

This book is meant primarily for readers who know some basic facts about Abraham Joshua Heschel and his religious philosophy. It deals with the philosophical and theological ramifications of his thought and his impact upon interreligious dialogue. Given the depth and scope of his thinking, the papers gathered here will also be illuminating for those who know little about Heschel but are interested in the fundamental problems that appear at the borders between philosophy and theology, religion and modernity, Judaism and Christianity, and, more broadly, problems of interfaith relations.

The present volume contains, in modified versions, almost all the papers presented in 2007 at the first scholarly conference devoted to Abraham Joshua Heschel and his legacy to take place in Poland. For a long time Heschel was virtually unknown in his native Poland. Given that post-war theology developed in the officially anti-religious atmosphere of communism, the conservatism of the Catholic Church was reinforced and the inclusion of non-standard religious inspiration, let alone from sources in the Jewish tradition, was extremely rare. Genuine Jewish thought, indeed any reflection referring to Judaism, was absent in Poland. Religiously inspired philosophy was hardly present in an academic environment that was dominated by Marxism. New trends in religious thought only appeared slowly in limited circles of Catholic intellectuals, primarily due to the translations of Western authors. Heschel was first translated in 1966, but it was only after 1989 that his major works became available in Polish. In general, Heschel is hardly known to average philosophers and theologians but his presence is growing in the Polish academia, as indicated by the growing number of master and doctoral works that have been written about his thought. Furthermore, an entire chapter will be devoted to Heschel in a major history of modern philosophy being prepared by Tadeusz Gadacz. We therefore have every reason to hope that as his influence rises worldwide it will continue to do so in Poland. The return of Heschel to Poland seems to us to be more significant than other examples of his growing impact. Had history been otherwise Heschel might have remained in Poland and become a writer of texts not only in Yiddish, Hebrew, German, English, but also Polish. Of course, when confronted with the shadow of the Holocaust such an alternative history can only strike us as an inappropriate. Still, the urge to assist with Heschel's "return" to Poland was prompted by an additional motive (especially for the first editor of this volume), an ongoing fascination with Heschel's philosophy of religion and interreligious relations.

The conference took place in Heschel's native city at the University of Warsaw, during the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth, and constituted an attempt to put Poland on the wider map of Heschel scholarship. We are happy that so many leading experts from the United States, Israel and other countries were able to participate. We are also glad that we were able to include several contributions by Polish authors. Our most ambitious goal was to contribute to the development of contemporary Jewish thought within the Polish academy. If this goal has to some extent been achieved we will feel justified in designating ourselves as disciples of Professor Heschel.

The title of the conference, "Abraham Joshua Heschel – Philosophy and Interreligious Dialogue: Between Poland and America," was somewhat different from the title of the present

book. Accordingly, here we not only consider philosophy, theology and interfaith dialogue, but also some aspects of Heschel's life. The first section of the book, "Between Poland and America," contains three contributions. First of all, there is the message which was sent to us by Susannah Heschel, who had originally intended to participate in the conference but was unable to do so given that her mother had just passed away. In addition to providing a review of biographical information about Heschel's life in Poland and the United States, the contribution of Rev. Waldemar Szczerbinski offers information about contemporary Polish studies of his thought. Finally, David Roskies provides an American perspective in the form of personal recollections about Heschel, an important man for the Havurat Shalom crowd who was able to effectively combine spiritual inwardness with social action. This is new material, and the same is true of the particularly interesting contribution of Michael Marmur, who describes, in a later section, the earliest remarks published in Poland by Heschel. Magdalena Stańczuk, who diligently read the major Warsaw Yiddish newspapers during the time which Heschel worked at the Institute of Judaic Studies, presented one more work concerning Heschel's life at the conference. No mention of Heschel was found in the papers, a detail which is worth mentioning despite the fact that it is disappointing.

The other three sections of the book are divided into those that are philosophical in nature, those that concern more theological and historical issues (although we are aware that such distinctions are often arbitrary), and those on interreligious dialogue, the area of theory and practice in which Heschel's influence has been and will likely remain the strongest. Indeed, Heschel can be called the most outstanding, and possibly only, "prophet" of interreligious dialogue.

The second section, "Philosophy and Judaism," opens with Karl Grözinger's paper on the various lines of traditional Jewish thought that can be identified in Heschel's philosophy; while acknowledging the Hasidic element in Heschel, Grözinger presents a more complex map of trends against which Heschel's thought should be seen, paying special attention to the polar duality between faith and religious practice. In the second paper of this section, David Novak describes Heschel's use of phenomenology, the approach suitable for seeing biblical revelation as an existentially relevant and irreducible phenomenon; he differs from Husserl by replacing the transcendental ego with God's I: "to intend transcendence is altogether different from the type of transcendental constitution Husserl remains with." Milan Lyčka tries to show that Heschel's approach to religion bears resemblance to the phenomenology of religion, as it has been practiced by such thinkers as Rudolf Otto and Gerardus van der Leeuw; the key link here is formed by the principle that it is religious facts rather than religious ideas that should be analyzed and by the acceptance of the irrational as the root of all reality. Andrzej Leder compares certain aspects of the philosophical projects of Heschel and Levinas, focusing in particular on the ways in which both philosophers addressed the question of how one can speak philosophically about transcendence; although he points to various similarities between both philosophies, Leder argues that Levinas stays within the realm of philosophy, whereas Heschel ends up within the realm of the prophetic. Adam Lipszyc juxtaposes Heschel's thought with the philosophical vision embedded in the poetic work of Edmond Jabès; Lipszyc shows that both Heschel and Jabès described God's presence in human life by referring to the image of the question, but they did so in two very different ways. Finally, in the last paper of this section, Agata Bielik-Robson discusses the place of aesthetic experience in the iconoclastic world of Judaism; in particular, she attempts to reconstruct Heschel's use of the

concept of the sublime and to point out the various difficulties that arise in his philosophy from the use of this concept.

The third section, "Theology and History," begins with Michael Marmur's presentation of halakhic pieces published by Heschel, at the age of fifteen, in a Warsaw-based Hebrew journal known as *Shaarei Torah*; these hitherto unknown *juvenilia* enable Marmur to claim that in these early writings Heschel was already asking questions he pondered in his mature works, citing examples concerning cognitive pluralism in Judaism and discussions of will and intention. Next, Paul Fenton shifts our attention to the next step in Heschel's development, i.e. his stay in Berlin, and tells the story of Heschel's friendship with the great scholar of Islam, Henry Corbin, whom he met in the German capital; Fenton shows that Heschel's theory of prophecy, as expounded in his doctoral thesis, exerted a profound influence on Corbin, who believed in a common ground or consonance between religious phenomena in all three Abrahamic religions and used Heschel's ideas in his own analyses of Islam. Annette Aronowicz compares some aspects of Heschel's Yiddish book *Kotsk* with its English version, and suggests – very much as Roskies does on the basis of cooperation with Heschel on the translation from Yiddish – that the Yiddish version points to something that the English translation cannot grasp; yet both search for ways to overcome the religious/secular dichotomy. Bernhard Dolna investigates the decisive role of prophecy in Heschel's own life, concluding that even though he was not a prophet in the literal sense, he came close, as he became one of those who "cannot say man without thinking God." Dror Bondi considers the importance of questions for Heschel – the questions to which religion is an answer, the fact that a human being is being asked, and that men do not ask this question. The last three papers in this section touch upon the historical drama of the Shoah and its impact on theology. Shoshana Ronen compares Heschel with Hans Jonas in relation to the question of the concept of God that can be accepted after the Shoah; she attempts to show that although Heschel, unlike Jonas, did not raise this question openly, his vision of God bears deep resemblance to Jonas's theological speculation on the non-omnipotent God. Next, Anna Banasiak traces and juxtaposes Heschel and Emil Fackenheim's reactions to the Shoah; she argues that "Fackenheim and Heschel consider Auschwitz to be an unredeemed past which should be an ever-present challenge to the human mind." Finally, following Heschel's insights, Anna Szczepan-Wojnarska meditates in her essay on the possibilities of understanding suffering in the framework of religion, including the tragic suffering of the Shoah; she argues that suffering is not the ground of our relation to God, but it is the awareness of divine presence that enables the pious to endure their suffering.

The last section, "Interreligious Dialogue," includes contributions by individuals who are not simply writing about Christian-Jewish dialogue but are involved in it. The first two papers refer to Heschel's landmark lecture "No Religion Is an Island," and both expand on reflections published earlier in *Shofar* (No 26, 2007). Indeed, all the papers in this section refer to that lecture, as well as referencing Heschel's concept of "depth theology." Alon Goshen-Gottstein formulates the key questions for Heschel involved in facing interfaith discussions, including the issue of right attitudes as opposed to mere opinions, the problem of pluralism versus relativism, as well as the role of halakhah in the theory of religious pluralism and the elitist character of dialogue. Heschel within this context is presented as the father of Jewish reflection on the meaning of interfaith dialogue as a new form of cultural practice. In his contribution, Stanisław Krajewski argues that elitism should be overcome in our age, that Heschel's role as a precursor of the *Dabru emet* declaration should be acknowledged (a point previously

made in the postscript to the Polish edition of the collection “No Religion Is an Island” ed. by Sherwin and Kasimow), and that in order to continue his approach in a way appropriate to our own time, a plurality of covenants should be recognized and an effort to extend (or diversify) the meaning of Israel should be made. Furthermore, the concept of deep interfaith dialogue is introduced and described as an encounter with no particular goal or specific expectations. Michael Signer considers the memorandum written by Heschel for the American Jewish Committee to Cardinal Bea as an antecedent to “No Religion...” and argues that Heschel was introducing an innovative reading of traditional Jewish anthropology in order to include the interreligious encounter as the exploration of *imago dei* in the other. In the contribution of Edward Kaplan the development of the Heschelian idea of pre-conceptual “depth theology” is discussed as the background to “No Religion...” and its radical theology of pluralism; in addition, Kaplan considers Heschel’s influence on Thomas Merton, who developed his own version of depth theology as the foundation for the proper attitude to Judaism and interfaith dialogue in general. Harold Kasimow argues that Heschel’s view of the pluralism of religions is remarkably similar to that of the Dalai Lama, and that Heschel is an “interreligious artist” who transcends the division between pluralist and inclusivist approaches to the plurality of religions. Stanisław Obirek, a former Jesuit, considers Heschel’s Jewish amazement at the idea that Christology can replace theocentric thought, and indicates that new theological developments have opened possibilities for overcoming the opposition between the two, even though the Vatican is against some of these new developments. Seth Ward describes Heschel’s attitude towards Islam, the religion to which he referred when writing about Maimonides, Israel, and various other issues, but about which he knew much less than Christianity. Ward points out that despite this fact many of Heschel’s insights are still valid, including the stress within Islam on divine omnipotence rather than closeness to man, as well as an opposition amongst Muslims to the idea of a “God in need,” that is to say in need of man – an idea that would negate the perfect God of Islam and challenge the dominant philosophical tradition of equating God with the Absolute. Nevertheless, the message of Heschel’s life and work is that mutual respect is possible, which can be applied to Jewish-Muslim, Christian-Muslim, and Western-Muslim relations.

### *Acknowledgments*

The conference “Abraham Joshua Heschel – Philosophy and Interreligious Dialogue: Between Poland and America” took place at the University of Warsaw, on June 25–27, 2007. It was possible due to the support of the University and its Institute of Philosophy, as well as generous financial contributions by three other institutions: The Adam Mickiewicz Institute of Warsaw, Fritz Thyssen Stiftung für Wissenschaftsförderung from Germany, and The Louis Finkelstein Institute for Religious and Social Studies of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, the school in which Abraham Joshua Heschel taught for the last 25 years of his life. The important contribution of the Thyssen Foundation was channeled through the Kollegium Jüdische Studien of the University of Potsdam, and was especially made possible by Professor Karl Grözinger. One session took place in the hall of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, in which Heschel worked for a few months in 1938. We are grateful to all of the above-mentioned institutions.



We would also like to thank all of the members of the academic committee of the conference, who by their participation have expressed trust in our endeavor. The committee was composed of the following professors: Tadeusz Gadacz (Polish Academy of Sciences), Ewa Geller (Warsaw University), Neil Gillman (Jewish Theological Seminary), Arthur Green (Hebrew College), Karl Erich Grözinger (Universität Potsdam), Susannah Heschel (Dartmouth College), Edward K. Kaplan (Brandeis University), Harold Kasimow (Grinnell College), Stanisław Krajewski (Warsaw University), Michael Marmur (Hebrew Union College, Jerusalem), Alan Mittelman (Jewish Theological Seminary), David Novak (University of Toronto), Jerzy Ochmann (Jagiellonian University), David Roskies (Jewish Theological Seminary), Stefan Schreiner (Universität Tübingen), Michael Signer (University of Notre Dame), Byron Sherwin (Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies, Chicago), Waldemar Szczerbiński (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań). Most of them participated in the conference and have contributed papers to the present volume. Some papers presented at the conference are, for various reasons, not included here (those by Michał Galas, Gabriel Moked, Jerzy Ochmann, Luiz Felipe de Ponde, Magdalena Stańczuk).

The organizing committee of the conference included Monika Elliott, Adam Lipszyc, Jakub Mach, and Teresa Śmiechowska and was chaired by Stanisław Krajewski.

The editors are grateful to Karl Grözinger, the editor of Harrassowitz Verlag's series, who proposed the inclusion of this collection in the series and to C. Cain Elliott who has edited the text.

### *Dedication*

After this volume had been prepared for publication we learned about the death of Rabbi Professor Michael Signer. He was a participant in our conference, an author of a paper in this collection and helped us in its preparation. He was a dear friend, an outstanding scholar and an important leader in Jewish-Christian dialogue. This book is dedicated to his memory.

Stanisław Krajewski and Adam Lipszyc