

QUESTIONS TO DR^a SUSANNAH HESCHEL

The Center for Jewish Studies of USP – University of São Paulo – organized an International Symposium on *Heschel, the Theologian Poet*, on August the 23rd and 24th, 2022, held at the Auditorium Building of its Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences.

On 23rd August 2022, Susannah Heschel and Moacir Amâncio, led by the Chairman - Rabbi Alexandre Leone, opened this International Symposium on *Heschel, the Theologian Poet*, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of his death (1907-1972). Abraham Joshua Heschel was a Jewish *darshan*, professor, poet, author and certainly one of the greatest contemporary Jewish philosophers. The core of Heschel's philosophical and theological analysis centered around the growing dehumanization of 20th century western civilization and the need of bringing it back to ethics and universal dignity. The renewal of humanism after the collapse of civilization brought about during and after Second World War is Heschel's greatest contribution to contemporary philosophy. This International Symposium approached different aspects of ethics and religious humanism in Heschel's work and thought.

Near the end of this first morning conference, the audience addressed Dr. Susannah Heschel some questions concerning her understanding of Jewish humanism, interfaith dialogue, as well as several other relevant topics, which she regarded both from the perspective of her academic experience and the teachings come from her shared life with her father, Abraham Joshua Heschel. We have selected, translated and summarized here the main questions and the very appreciated answers of Dr. Susannah Heschel.¹

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Rabbi Alexandre Leone

Question: Professor Doctor Susannah Heschel, around the 1950' s or 60's, three different Jewish philosophers use the same image to talk about our time. Max Horkheimer writes about the "eclipse of reason", and a few years later, Martin Buber, towards the end of his work, writes a book whose title is the *Eclipse of God*. A short time later, Abraham Joshua Heschel, in

¹ Seleção, transcrição e notas: Pe. Donizete Luiz Ribeiro, NDS, Profs. Marivan Soares Ramos e Cicero Lourenço da Silva.

that magnificent book *Who is man*, speaks in terms of the *eclipse of mankind*. This picture of the eclipse, interestingly enough, occurs in the writings of three thinkers just after the Holocaust, and maybe assuming three different aspects of this eclipse. What I would like to ask is: would you explain a bit more what the eclipse of humanity is? Regarding the urgency that Heschel perceived in his time: is it also an urgency of our own time?

Susannah Heschel: Thank you, Rabbi Leone. It is a very interesting question and I think the metaphor that uses an eclipse is temporary, it is not forever. An eclipse comes and an eclipse goes and it's interesting to put those three together: *eclipse of Reason, eclipse of God, eclipse of humanity*. Max Horkheimer, in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, feels that there is another element to the Enlightenment than reason. There's also the element of the irrational and that fascism was the triumph of the irrational over the rational. So, there was an eclipse of reason. If reason were to come back and triumph, we would not have fascism. I think it's too simple. And I think what we're seeing today around the world with the fascination with fascism, growing fascism and that is more than an eclipse of reason. Buber spoke about an *Eclipse of God* - my father rejected that because he felt that putting responsibility on God is a kind of abdication of our moral responsibility. So, considering the difference between saying *God controls the world* and *humans also have responsibility*, my father would say: the question to ask is not where was God that has such hubris, but to say, *how does God continue to have faith in us given how we behave?* How can we even have hopes for the future of humanity when we see throughout this world people being tortured? How does a person torture another human being?

Before I came here I read Bernardo Kucinski's book². That book has changed my life. I'll have all my students read that book and I felt I'm coming to a country that is a swamp of blood. How can you kill your own children? I don't demean you, you understand. I'm talking about the dictatorship. How can they kill their own children like this? And Kucinski writes there, you know, the Nazis wrote down the name of each person who came to a concentration camp. You can go to a memorial, you can go to Auschwitz and here we call it "disappeared", "murdered", no Memorial, no name, no responsibility, no one wrote down a name. How can that be? How can people behave this way? So that's why my father said it's an *eclipse of*

² BERNARDO KUCINSKI, *K – Relato de Uma Busca*, Cia das Letras, 2016.

humanity and he said “eclipse” because he had a little hope that it doesn't have to be that way.

Rabbi Leone

You can't imagine how meaningful that is not only for the time of the dictatorship but even for today. It's not something only historical.

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Question: I've noticed that in the writings of your father, though he dialogues with, and critiques several contemporary thinkers, as well as others that came before him, he hardly ever mentions the names of the ones he's criticizing. Why?

Susannah Heschel: Yes, this is true, he disagrees with the argument but not with the human being. And I think he does this out of respect and to say that his argument is not with a person. He disagrees with an idea and I like that, I appreciate that. But I will say, in his dissertation it's different. Before the war he was very clear in naming names in his dissertation, this scholar, that scholar said this and that. So, it's different after the war and maybe I think my father was so deeply affected that he felt he didn't want to say something bad about a human being and so he didn't do that.

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Question: I'm curious about this idea of a “mandate” because the way I understand Judaism it's more of a set of rules of conduct that tell you what to do in the micro decisions of life: what to do, what not to do and then, in the end of life, someone could say “you know, that was your impact, that's how you changed the world or not. The ideal mandate, I think - I'm not a scholar on that - I think more of Christian Protestantism and Catholicism, in which people have missions or don't have missions. So, I'm wondering how this idea of mandate clashes with the idea of the small “micro ethical” decisions that we have to do like going or not to Selma or going or not to a demonstration on Paulista Avenue. What we do that anyone can do, not only those who have this big mission. Everyone confronts these micro daily decisions. Thank you.

Susannah Heschel: So, let me tell you about an argument my father had. During the Vietnam war my father started an organization called *Clergy and Layman Concerned About Vietnam*.

And he started it because Seymour Melman, a professor at Columbia had gathered material demonstrating the war crimes that the United States was committing. That this was no longer a war with a political purpose and Military strategy; it was a war of daily crimes, of dropping bombs of destroying land, of killing people and that's what made my father decide he had to oppose the war. My father was not a pacifist, but this war was wrong. And during that period of time – so, this is by the way a very intense period in my father's life, 1963 to 1968 in particular - that year 1965 was an extraordinary year for my father. It was the year he spent two months - we spent two months - in Israel. My father was traveling and lecturing in Israel. It was the year he founded that anti-war organization, the year he gave the lecture *No Religion is an Island*, it was the year that the second Vatican Council issued *Nostra Aetate*. There was a lot in that year, but during that time my father had an argument with Father Daniel Berrigan – whose brother who was also a priest, Philip Berrigan. They used to come to our home, especially Daniel Berrigan, for Shabbat dinner. Berrigan's argument was that my father should commit Civil Disobedience and go to prison as a symbolic gesture. And my father said that he could accomplish more by not being in prison, but by talking to people, by lecturing, by going to colleges, by trying to convince people, by writing. So, the question for my father was, what is the goal? What is the purpose here? I want to end the war. How do I do that most effectively in my life? Writing? Speaking out? Talking to people? What should I do? That was how he decided: Selma. My father was pretty fragile, he had a weak heart, he couldn't go as a freedom rider on the - you know what that is - bus when people were being beaten and, so, he couldn't survive it - and Selma was at that moment actually more of a celebration than a protest because the president of the United States supported the march and that was a major political moment. But how do we make these decisions? What to do? We have to think about clearly, what is the goal we want to accomplish? What am I able to do to accomplish that goal? But I think there's also a question of our own conscience. What do I need to do? What do I need to do to be able to live with myself? What do I have to do? In the last few years, look at the people who go to the rallies with Donald Trump. He engages in mockery, he makes fun of people, he makes fun of disabled people... It's racist and it's mockery and the people cheer. They cheer the mockery, they see they are destroying their own dignity. How will they ever recover it? I don't know and I think that's something we need to worry about, because without a sense of dignity it's very difficult for us as human beings to repent, to create a better world, to have a sense of moral responsibility. Without dignity how do we do that? So, I'm very

concerned about that and I think, in other words, that there are marches, they are writing speeches, they are writing articles speaking out to friends, but there are also subtle ways, subtle things like dignity that we have to be attentive to and we need to ask ourselves right now: this will come to an end at some point but, how will we recover? The Germans, after 1945, had the same problem. How to recover a moral compass after what they did - and that was the 1950's. How can they possibly find their ethical footing again? The ministers asked, but so did the politicians. How do we become an ethical country where people will respect us? And I say that about the United States. How can we once again become an ethical country where people will respect us? How will we regain our dignity? And I think we should start worrying about that now. And it's a very much a religious question we should be asking our religious Leaders: give us help give us advice, what to do?

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Question: I'd like to thank you and ask about something that came up in a conversation I had recently with some students on the text of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. How did your father's philosophy interact with that document which on one hand entailed an apology to the universality of human rights, but on the other, did not prevent discrimination against vast segments of the American population – especially blacks – due to racial laws? My question approaches also the very nature of *kavanah*, once it thinks about the ways from which intention goes beyond principles to the concrete manifestation of change in the world.

Susannah Heschel: The United States didn't want to sign the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* because they said then they'll come after the United States for our racism, our Jim Crow laws. And that's exactly the problem. And in the United States there is a political movement of contempt for the United Nations, which I think we see in other countries as well. And there's a sense that there is no "universal human". So, of course, that was anathema to my father. I mentioned earlier, Meir Kahane said "never again to the Jews". My father said "never again to anyone"; it was universal. I know my father would be very upset by the politicians who are arising today in Israel. Bezalel Smotrich, who may end up with 15 seats in the Knesset. My father would be appalled by that. There is Jewish racism also and that's something we have not paid enough attention to. At least I see in my colleagues, my friends in the United States. Racism in Jewish texts including some of the texts that I otherwise love - in a Hasidic text and kabbalistic texts, it is there. We all have this. We also have contempt for women. The

dignity of women is not valued the same as the dignity of the men and the rights of women and the lives of women. There are aspects of the Torah that I think would count as criminal. *Sotah*³ is one passage for instance; sexual assault. So, that sense of the universal, the human universal, seems to be something new in Jewish thought - a classical Jewish thought - but I think there are also intimations of it which is why I mentioned Yaakov Emden, for instance. And I think that's something that my father brings out certainly in his book *Who is Man* but elsewhere. Judaism is not unified. There are different views and my father doesn't try to reconcile them. He says there's this view and there's this view, different understandings of Revelation. They coexist, but I think we have an innate moral conscience and we know what's right and what's wrong. And the idea that some human beings are more precious to God than others is a denial of God. My father was very clear about that.

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Prof. Cicero: My question is about the legacy of your father. In Brazil, just like in the USA, the Christian Right uses politics to advance ideas clearly contrary to human rights. How did your father construct such a humanitarian religious philosophy in a time when political theology was associated with Carl Schmitt and other negative ideas around religion?

Susannah Heschel: You're asking several things and they're all important and deserve more than a simple quick answer. You know, by the way, that Carl Schmidt was very close to certain Christian leaders who supported Hitler. And, of course, for my father that was horrible. But I think the larger question that you're asking is really what would my father say to these evangelical leaders. How would he speak to them and how would we respond to them and to the people who were attracted to them. That's really what you're asking, right? So what would he say? First of all let me say: my father was a very gentle person. He never talked to Christians about antisemitism. It wasn't necessary. When I was a child, my father often had visitors from the Vatican or from the *Union Theological Seminary*. Christians would come to our home for Shabbat Dinner or for a Passover Sêder, and in those days it was very unusual. It was the first time Catholics were told in America in the 50's not to socialize with anyone who was not a Catholic. For a nun and a priest to come to our home wearing religious clothing for Shabbat Dinner, to come into our home and to see my father at the table pray... you could tell they

³ Sotáh (הַשֹּׂאָה) is a concept derived from rabbinic Judaism, found in the Talmud, and refers, among other subjects, to the trial of an adulterous woman. (Editor's note)

were transformed by the moment. They suddenly realized that you couldn't say "this person is not going to go to heaven". They suddenly realize that as Christians they had something to learn about God from a Jew. And it was 2.000 years since they felt that way. Two thousand years! So maybe what my father in those moments was doing was simply being a religious Jew and allowing Christians to experience Judaism at its most holy moments and have a chance to be transformed. I don't know if everyone would react like that, but I think that my father felt that we, as Jews, shouldn't be ashamed of being Jewish as many were in America. That we shouldn't try to hide or live in a ghetto world, that people have something to learn about God from Jews and maybe we can help them and maybe that is part of our mandate today. So I think, sometimes there is a longing among some of the Evangelical Christians that I have experienced. I lived for example, in Dallas, Texas, for three Years. I went to Israel every summer to recuperate, but I felt that they wanted more from their Christianity than going to church on Sunday for one hour and they didn't know how to do it. They didn't know what we know, which is that Judaism is every day and it's in our home and not just in the synagogue. That we have a language of Hebrew, that we have customs, that we have an ethnicity, that we have little phrases we say like, "Baruch Hashem" and "Good Shabbos" and things like that. I think Christian evangelicals want to ethnicize Christianity. I think they have shuttle envy. I think they would like to be more like Judaism and I think that might be one way of trying to say to that, "look you can have this without being right-wing politically", that is, without damning other people, without saying we're good and they're bad, without saying either you're friend or an enemy, like Carl Schmidt. I think we can show it to them and I think that they do long for that. So, I say this because I do have some hope, even when I see people who are against everything I stand for. Still I think we can't give up and maybe there is a way of showing them that it's possible. Look, we as Jews, we have what they want: community. We have ethnicity, we have everything that they want too and we can embrace the whole world and not have that schmittian friend-enemy. So that's just a small bit of a response on a very practical level. Thank you!

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Question: I'd like to ask you two questions: one question is what role did Yiddish play in your family life because I'm very interested in the *Yiddish-schreiben* aspect of your father's life and

work and I would also like to know how your father viewed the decline of Yiddish and the *matzav*, the situation of Yiddish towards the end of his life.

Susannah Heschel: Thank you for the question. My father grew up speaking Yiddish as a child, of course, and he wrote his last book in Yiddish on the *Kotzker*. Some of my father's family managed to get out of Europe before the war. If they didn't, whoever didn't get out before the war was killed, but a few got out including my father's sister. My father was three years old when his sister got married. She was seventeen and she married a cousin and they moved to Vienna and they got out of Vienna just before the war and they came to New York city. My father had his sister and a brother who also got out and was in England, but with the family, as with my father's sister, only spoke Yiddish. And so my father's cousin, brother-in-law, my uncle also only spoke Yiddish. So, certainly when we were family it was only Yiddish. And so it's really remarkable thing that my father wrote books in four languages, not many people. But there was that aspect the Yiddish of the of the religious world of the hassidic world, then my father was friend with some Yiddish writers. Chaim Grade was a good friend and there were others as well. Hillel Seidman, you might know, was also a friend - his daughter's my friend - he was a journalist; Gershom Jacobson, who wrote for a Yiddish newspaper, was another good friend. So they were friends of my father's who would come to our home and would speak Yiddish at all. In terms of a decline, yes, my father was concerned about the way that Hebrew was becoming more important than Yiddish and he felt that Yiddish was nonetheless an extremely important language which is why he wrote about the *Kotzker* in Yiddish, because there are some things you can only say in Yiddish. And maybe there were some things that my father could only talk about in Yiddish. Just as I think is true for everybody, there's some things when you speak more than one language, there's some ideas, some words, some things you only feel you can say in that language and not in the other. My father never used the word *holocaust* like that or *shoah*. He talked about what happened, what happened during the war, and he didn't address it directly very often, only occasionally. And when he did it was in Yiddish. So, we can ask ourselves why did he choose this language versus that language for certain books, certain ideas. After the war my father never again wrote in German and would never go to Germany even though he was invited.

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Question: Did he write poetry in English?

Susannah Heschel: No.

Question: Only in Yiddish?

Susannah Heschel: And that was when he was actually in Vilna with a group of Yiddish poets the young Vilna, (Chaim) Grade and few others were there and that was a small book that he published with a dedication to his father and he was often very shy about those poems. He didn't want them republished, he didn't want them translated, because he was very young then. And I think it's common to many of us, when we look back at something we wrote when we were very young... he was... we often feel a little embarrassed: "I wrote that, you know. I was 19". Thank you

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Question: Professor could you please share with us some thoughts from your father on the interfaith dialogue and cooperation and if he had any relations to any institution of interfaith cooperation?

Susannah Heschel: My father used to say that interfaith has to begin with faith. What is my faith? Do I know what my faith is? So, my father used to say the problem with interfaith is that too often the people who participate don't really know their own religion. So, how can they begin to talk to others? He said sometimes, well, maybe you know in this book *Moral Grandeur* there's an essay that begins with a funny story. My father says he was invited once to a conference to speak about God in Judaism and then he agreed and then he got the program and the program had the title of his lecture *The Idea of God in Judaism*. God is not an idea. I had this experience myself when I was a graduate student and a professor in class kept talking about "the God idea". You know, I'm not an idea either! I'm a person! I'm alive, I'm present, I'm here, and God is not just some idea. And once God becomes an idea, my father says, that's not faith anymore. So that was very important for my father to make that point. My father says in *Torah Min Ha-shamaim*, in which one of the main themes is, how do you make the transcendent immanent and the immanent transcendent? So, how do you make the transcendent immanent, so God is transcendent, but how can you feel God's presence everywhere? How do you make God present when God is so remote and so transcendent?

My father used to joke about the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, and so did Martin Luther King, who was another good friend. Tillich said "God is the ground of being". My father said

“okay, so he's a ground of being, so let him be the ground of being - doesn't do anything, I'm not for, I'm not against, what does it matter? It doesn't mean anything, there's no command, there's no obligation. Ground of being... what does that mean? You don't march in Selma for a ground of being, you don't scream against the war in Vietnam for a ground of being, the prophets are not screaming in agony on behalf of the poor and the suffering... I don't think Ground of being will stop people torturing other human beings. What is it that keeps people from feeling themselves the agony of other human beings? That's the question. So with interfaith too if God has to command too “I want this, I want this to be a better world, I want this to be a world of justice”, how do I make God's immanence transcendent? As my father always said, these are questions that face all human beings of all religions and those are the kinds of questions we should talk about. What religious resources do we have to stop torture? It doesn't matter what our particular religion says. That's not the point. More important is what questions do we ask as religious people. There's so much talk these days about leadership. I see all the time. I have two children and there are all kinds of programs that come through: “send your children to this camp or this program. We train leaders”. What do you think my father would say? He would be appalled! What leaders? It's principles! It's principles, moral principles, that's what you want. What's a leader? Bolsonaro is also a leader, no? Trump... So my father felt this is what interfaith really should focus on and he says over and over, one article after another, in this piece *No Religion is an Island* what do we do in moments of despair? - we all have despair, we religious people. And how do we support each other in those moments?

One last thing: there's a prayer in Judaism where we speak of God resurrecting the dead. You know, a lot of well-meaning liberal jews don't believe that the dead will be resurrected, including Saadya (who was not a liberal, but a medieval philosopher, okay?). And so in some reformed prayer books they change it, instead of *God resurrects the dead* it says *God resurrects everything*. And I think for my father prayers aren't supposed to describe the world as it is, but to give expression to hope, to longing, to wishes. What could we want more than anything when someone we love dies? That they should come back to life, it's what we want. Prayer is an opportunity to speak in terms of hope and wish and longing, and that's why prayer, my father says, is the home for the soul. So, I think interfaith, for my father, was about that where our hopes and our wishes and our longings that we all share, we can focus on, and

that's what should go on in synagogues and in churches. Let's speak of our longing that this should be a world of justice, there should be no torture, there should be no poverty, there should be no racism. We long for that, we long for that for others and for ourselves and because we can't possibly live a full human life when other people are suffering. So, I think that's what interfaith should be for my father. Thank you.

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Rabbi Leone: It's wonderful to be with you. I'm so happy that you made this conference.

Susannah Heschel: It's wonderful to meet everyone and I think Brazil is an extraordinary place and the fact that you are so interested in my father, Jews and Christians here, I think that's really extraordinary. It would make my father so happy! I wish I could phone him and tell him. I can't imagine this community here in Brazil and he would be so happy! Thank you, thank you very much!