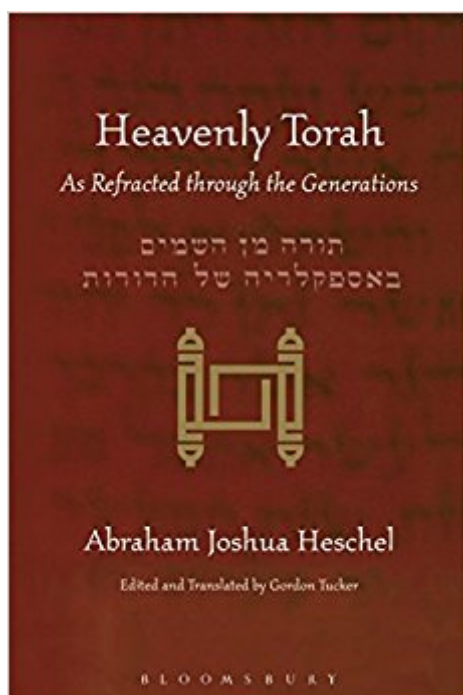


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Heavenly Torah: As Refracted Through The Generations



Synopsis

Known most widely for his role in the civil rights and peace movements of the 1960s, Abraham Joshua Heschel made major scholarly contributions to the fields of biblical studies, rabbinics, medieval Jewish philosophy, Hasidism, and mysticism. Yet his most ambitious scholarly achievement, his three-volume study of Rabbinic Judaism, is only now appearing in English. Heschel's great insight is that the world of rabbinic thought can be divided into two types or schools, those of Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael, and that the historic disputes between the two are based on fundamental differences over the nature of revelation and religion. Furthermore, this disagreement constitutes a basic and necessary ongoing polarity within Judaism between immanence and transcendence, mysticism and rationalism, neo-Platonism and Aristotelianism. Heschel then goes on to show how these two fundamental theologies of revelation may be used to interpret a great number of topics central to Judaism.

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review Heschel (1907-72), a distinguished religious philosopher, is best known for his theological writings. Heavenly Torah was written originally in Hebrew, and this is the first English translation, compiled and readied for publication by Rabbi David Feldman after Heschel's death. Heschel describes the views of the schools of Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Akiva on a multitude of subjects involving rabbinic Judaism and then leaves the choice to readers. The subjects include the nature of the Torah, miracles, the sacrificial system in the temple, human suffering, the commands to love God, Torah versus livelihood, and the issue of theological language. Other topics include the

idea that Moses ascended to heaven, Moses' prophecy, God's descent to Earth, and the book of Deuteronomy. The final five chapters deal with the attitude toward Halakhah, its authority, and its susceptibility to modification and development. This is an ambitious work of tremendous significance, an indispensable guide to understanding the Torah and--consequently--the Jewish religion. Not simply for large religious collections but for any with active borrowers. George Cohen

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“Like Copernicus Heschel has set the world on its head Without actually examining the evidence, one can hardly be aware of how intrinsically valid is Heschel's hermeneutic principle. Without seeing how thorough and well-disciplined has been his study of Talmudic literature, one cannot fully appreciate his achievement in bringing some order and sense to it This is clearly a work of gigantic proportions.” • Jacob Neusner (Jacob Neusner) “one of the most important books in Jewish Studies.” • Jewish Herald-Voice, November 25, 2004 “This is an ambitious work of tremendous significance, and indispensable guide to understanding the Torah and- consequently- the Jewish religion. Not simply for large religious collections, but for any with active borrowers.” • Booklist, November 15, 2004 “Heschel's most important, ambitious, and monumental work. This translation will best serve academics who do not have complete or even partial control of Hebrew, it is accessible enough for any lay reader interested in Jewish theology. A tour de force of gigantic proportions; recommended for all libraries.” • Library Journal, 1/28/05 “The publication of this book, the fruit of over a decade of work, and coinciding with the 100th anniversary of Heschel's birth (1905), and his 32nd yahrzeit, is an event! far more than a simple translation. Only on the inside title page do we discover the names of the editors and translators. This act of generosity on the part of Rabbis Tucker and Levin must be acknowledged. But of course, this is entirely Heschel's book, and that is cause enough for radical amazement.” • Shema, January 2005 “it reveals Heschel's rarely equaled mastery of the entire body of rabbinic, philosophical and mystical literature, both the original sources and the secondary literature. In his tragically brief lifetime, Heschel represented many role models. He was the hero of modern Jewish theologians, the father of the new Jewish spirituality and the eloquent spokesperson for all who were devoted to repairing our seriously flawed world. These two new books speak to his enduring contributions in all of these

areas. The Jewish Week, 12/24/04 “Gordon Tucker (and Leonard Levin) have done a superb job of assembling, editing, abridging and translating a huge, not-quite-finished manuscript. Others literally died trying to translate this sprawling masterpiece. On the whole, the introductions to each chapter, the explanatory notes on almost every page (including identifying Heschel’s often obscure sources) are wonderful aids in working through this massive work. Here, now, the greatest Jewish thinker in American history, the true inheritor of Polish Hasidism and German Jewish scholarship, the friend of Martin Luther King and the Pope, our master and teacher, Abraham Joshua Heschel, becomes at last, the major interpreter of classical Judaism. May God, who makes all things possible, be blessed. Judaism, forthcoming in 2005 “The present translation for the original Hebrew is a fine English edition of Heschel’s most substantive contribution to the study of early rabbinic literature, with very helpful notes added by the translator. All libraries serving Judaica and religion programs will want to purchase this volume. Highly recommended. Choice, July 2005 (CHOICE) “Citing patterns that underlay the rabbinical passages, the text of Heavenly Torah uncovers the intellectual and spiritual riches of the Talmudic tradition and applies those teachings to the concerns of the modern age. Heavenly Torah is thus a major addition to the library of Religious Humanism in our time. Masterfully brought to the marketplace in a beautiful edition by Continuum Books, who were also responsible for publishing Jonathan Sacks’s masterpiece The Dignity of Difference, and translated by Gordon Tucker with precision and tremendous knowledge and skill, Heavenly Torah is a seminal addition to our library of Jewish studies. The English version of the book makes completely transparent the intent and intellectual context of the original—a matter that has been simplified not merely by the clear translation of the texts, citations and footnotes, but by the addition layer of Tucker’s own footnotes and illuminating chapter introductions that make Heschel’s aims wholly clear to the reader—a matter that is sometimes hard to fully grasp with the dense opacity of the Hebrew original. the English version of the book functions not merely as a brilliantly articulated interweaving of rabbinical texts and ideas, but serves as a general introduction—presented with great clarity and crystalline intelligibility—for the reader who is beginning to learn rabbinical texts. The Center for Sephardic Heritage, 4/6/05 “brilliantly translated a superb job of assembling, abridging, and translating a huge, not-quite-finished manuscript the introduction to each chapter, the explanatory notes on almost every page are wonderful aids in working through this massive work. Current Theological Writing (Current Theological Writing) “Heavenly Torah is a deeply learned, eloquent and extensive demonstration of the richness of a tradition that cannot be

captured by one idea, movement or approach.

• The Jewish Week, September 2005 (Jewish Week Book Page)

“In Heavenly Torah, a masterwork of dizzying scholarship, the great sage of our day Abraham Joshua Heschel explores and explicates the two Jewish theological paths epitomized by these antagonistic yet complementary approaches to scriptural interpretation and religious philosophy.

• Catholic Library World, September 2005 (Catholic Library World)

“This excellent translation of all three Hebrew volumes, plus helpful notes and introductions by the translators, is a great boon to anyone interested in classical Jewish theology and Heschel’s rethinking of it. This work demonstrates the opposite of Bernard Lonergan’s bon mot about “ideas passed from book to book without any evidence of having gone through a mind.

• The theology of the Rabbis of the Talmud (whose role in Judaism is at least as important as the role of the Church Fathers in Christianity) comes alive in this work precisely because it went through Heschel’s great mind.

As one who was privileged to be Professor Heschel’s student when he was writing this great work, I rejoice it is now available to a wider audience. I can well imagine a year-long course on Judaism using this book alone. It is not only about Judaism; it is truly from it. It is surely a primary, not a secondary text, both for Jews and for gentiles, especially for Christians who too worship the Lord God of Israel and study His Torah.

• First Things, November 2005 (First Things)

“This is a work of tremendous significance for understanding Judaism.’ (Booklist Top Ten Books of the Year in Religion)

“This book is so clearly written and well organized that such need not be the case... This book is a rich lode of explorations of God’s ways with humanity and humans’ ways with God or, to change the figure, a Schatzkammer, a treasure house of heavenly wisdom.”- Gerard S. Sloyan, Horizons, Fall 2005 (Horizons)

“I think of Torah MinHashamayim, Abraham Joshua Heschel’s work on Rabbinic Theology, as an unfinished symphony. This work is like a symphony with many movements. Heschel’s book is never explicitly polemical, but it nevertheless remains a passionate protest against both rigid literalists of Torah and those on the other side who dismiss the Torah as if it were only poetry. Torah MinHashamayim is many things: a dazzling work of scholarship in Rabbinic Literature, a portrait of the tension between two differing world views, and more. Gordon Tucker is to be appreciated for having undertaken this incredibly difficult work of translation and for having done it as well as it can be done.”

• San Diego Jewish Journal, December 2005

“For those who wish to enter the world of rabbinic exegesis and theology, Abraham J. Heschel’s Heavenly Torah: As Refracted Through the Generations, is a fine introduction. His masterwork now appears in English for the first time. It is by any measure an astonishing accomplishment of historical and theological scholarship. Heschel knew and loved these ancient texts, and his

expositions of them can help non-Jews to catch the spirit of rabbinic Judaism and to appreciate the rabbis' reverences for Scripture, their mental sharpness and their sense for issues that continue to engage both Jewish and Christian theologians today."- America, March 13, 2006 (America: The National Catholic Weekly)"This is a splendid translation of a pivotal work. Tucker and Levin make the intricacies of Heschel's thoughts understandable to the reader." -Shamash Book of the Month, July 2006"The translators have skillfully transformed Heschel's complex study of the doctrine of "Divine revelation," into an accessible text for students and scholars alike. The translation itself is clear and avoids archaic renditions of difficult texts. Importantly, the translators are careful to remain faithful to Heschel's original Hebrew work. Tucker and Levin deserve great credit for bringing this brilliant work to the modern student of Jewish theology, and especially for their masterful "unpacking" and contextualization of Heschel's Scholarly argument."- Summer 2006 (American Jewish Archives Journal)"This is a work of historical theology, considering two major schools in Judaism.... This is a book that demands considerable time and effort, but is well worth it."- Chaim Seymour, Association of Jewish Libraries: Newsletter, Sep./Oct. 2006 (Journal Of Nietzsche Studies)"Torah from Heaven," a curious translation of Heschel's original three volumes "Torah Min Hashamayim" or in his alternate English, "The Theology of Ancient Judaism," is, perhaps, his masterpiece. Published over many years in Hebrew, it has now been made available in clear, idiomatic English (Continuum, 2005). Heschel once told me, with his uniquely accurate and typical exaggeration, that every word he wrote was a quotation from classical Jewish literature. This book comes close to being exactly that. It is an anthology of viewpoints clustered in two posing constellations...In the 42 years since the first volume of the Hebrew original of Torah Min Hashamayim appeared we have had time to consider the meaning of Rabbi Heschel's monumental study of rabbinic dualism. Can the school of Akiba and that of Ishma'el be ultimately reconciled? Can a Hegelian synthesis be accomplished? Does Heschel himself prefer one of the schools to the other? We might have expected that he would incline to the mystical-transcendent pole, but that does not seem to be the case. Indeed, he is most eloquent expounding the human aspect of Torah...Gordon Tucker (and Leonard Levin) have done a superb job of assembling, editing, abridging, and translating a huge, not quite-finished manuscript. Others literally died trying to translate this sprawling masterpiece. There may be some dissent from the inevitable emissions, some few typos, some doubts about Tucker's interpretations. But on the whole, the introductions to each chapter, the explanatory notes on almost every page (including identifying Heschel's often obscure sources) are wonderful aids in working through this massive work. Here, now, the greatest Jewish thinker in American history, the true inheritor of Polish Jewry, the greatest Jewish thinker in

American history, the true inheritor of Polish Hasidism and German Jewish scholarship, the friend of Martin Luther King and the Pope, our master and teacher, Abraham Joshua Heschel, becomes at last, the major interpreter of classical Judaism. May God, who makes all things possible, be blessed."

• Arnold Jacob Wolf, *Current Theological Writing*, 2007 (*Current Theological Writing*) "In order to understand the outsized public personality of Heschel, it is essential to appreciate the underlying source of his passions; that is, the Jewish tradition as it developed from its scriptures. And nowhere are these sources better revealed than in *Heavenly Torah*. It is precisely because he was anchored in a received tradition, with all of its particularities, that he can be a figure of universal importance."

- Matthew LaGrone, *Touchstone*, January 2007 Vol. 25 No. 1 (*Touchstone*) "This book is so clearly written and well organized that such need not be the case. This book is a rich lode of explorations of God's ways with humanity and humans' ways with God or, to change the figure, a *Schatzkammer*, a treasure house of heavenly wisdom."

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The original "Torah min Hashamayim b'Aspaklaria shel Hadorot" was a Heschel masterpiece; its style of writing was, for lack of a better term, "high-rabbinic-esoteric", and its accessibility was

therefor somewhat limited. The translator's notes point out many of Heschel's literary tricks which would otherwise be lost to the English reader. Other on-the-page annotations provide excellent background into issues and ideas which Heschel relies upon after assuming that the reader is highly literate in rabbinic scholarship at the "rosh-yeshivah" level. To those who have not yet reached such level, this work is a wonderful addition to a library of basic rabbinic thought. As a scholarly work it proves that Heschel was first and foremost a great rabbi.

Another great work from Heschel! Such knowledge and thought combined into one study is awesome. It is about the two main intellectual approaches taken in order to determine the true meaning of the words and sentences in the Hebrew bible. A lengthy and indepth study which must be studied over and over in order to obtain a true understanding of what is being stated. This is one of those rare works that makes religious belief into a living science rather than a mystical tale. A must read !

Heschel does well.

Excellent. Comprehensive. A wealth of information distilled through a knowledgeable perspective. Thoroughly documented for those of us who want citations.

This book is very informative and inspiring. It's a guide to help you turn the negative aspects of your life into positive.

great book can't recommend it highly enough.

The spouse says this is a great book, a useful reference, and a nice addition to her library. She refers to it on a regular basis.

Amazing Author am now at 58 reading all of his work I can get my hands on. I am not one usually drawn to existential writing but Heschel is the exception. Without being into existential babble I will say the Book Moral grandeur Spiritual audacity is one of the greatest works of moral and Jewish thought I have ever read. You can really see and feel one of the greatest minds of this century in reading this compilation of his speeches and writings. After that I felt ready to delve deeper into this is Torah and Jewish law and philosophy experiment.

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