A Way Out for All of Us[1]
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New Synagogue Project
Kol Nidre, 5786

In high school I read Rabbi Abraham Joshuah Heschel for the first time, his book *The Sabbath* changed my life. Heschel makes the argument that while the capitalism that dominates society is focused on accumulating things, about doing & producing, and changing the world - all about SPACE - it is possible to live in a different reality on Shabes, by building a Palace in TIME. I came to understand first conceptually and then, through making the day completely different in the way I moved through the world, that I could experience deep rest, be present with what is around me, and get a little taste of the world as it should be. The book is written in gorgeous prose, and would be impressive even if English was Heschel's first language. But it's not. Heschel grew up in Poland and came here as a refugee of World War Two.

Heschel escaped Europe in the summer of '39, six weeks before the German invasion.[2] Most of his family was murdered by the Nazis and he considered himself "a brand plucked from the fire of an altar to Satan."[3] Incredibly he published a piece about World War two and the Shoah AS it was taking place, WHILE his family was being murdered and titled it, "The Meaning of this War.[4]"

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[1] Immense gratitude to my sermon coach Jon Argaman for thought partnership, insights, encouragement, and editing and to chevrutahs Rabbi Dev Noily & Hazzan Shulamit Wise Fairman, Rabbi Alana Alpart, Rabbi Berel Wolvovsky, Eli Kasargod-Staub, & Rabbi Daniel Klein & davening partner Batya Levine for learning, teaching me, your thought partnership, and support and to brilliant editor and commenter Frances Kreimer. Gratitude to Minyan Segulah and Tifereth Israel who invited me to teach on Tisha Ba'av 5785 where I was able to present this essay from Heschel and clarify my own thinking about it.
[2] Heschel fled with the help of Julian Morgenstern, president of Hebrew Union College, and Alexander Guttmann, an eventual colleague, who secretly re-wrote Heschel's ordination certificate to meet American visa requirements. As recounted in the Jewish Theological Seminary's "Jubilee Tribute Project" and elsewhere. As far as I can tell, that means if discovered, this would have invalidated his application making his immigration "illegal."
[3] 1965 speech called "No Religion is an Island," reprinted in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays Edited by Susannah Heschel*, pg 235.
[4] An earlier version of this essay was originally delivered as a speech at a conference of Quaker leaders in Frankfurt-am-Main, Germany in 1938 and then expanded and printed in *Hebrew Union College Bulletin* 2, 3: 1-2, 18, March, 1943. Then later revised and reprinted in *Liberal Judaism*, Vol. 11, No. 10 (February,

Heschel begins his essay by talking about Teshuva. TESHUVA is of course the central work of the Days of Awe, what we are called to today. Teshuva is embedded into the very fabric of existence[5] and literally means turning or returning to the Source of Life, to the path.

Heschel begins explaining the meaning of World War II with a practice of teshuva[6] from the founder of Chasidism, the Baal Shem Tov. The Baal Shem Tov taught the following:

> IF you perceive that someone is doing something wrong, or you even hear about someone doing something wrong, Hashem has made this manifest for you in order to show you that you have inside you some speck of that particular badness itself. And even if you are a saint, even so, you have in you some fraction of a fraction of that thing, and the purpose is then for you to notice that thing in yourself and restore yourself and fix it. Through doing that, the other person you first perceived is also fixed, because they are dependent on you!

WOW. This is a radical teaching about teshuva. And I think it *only* makes sense if we think about it as a spiritual practice. How does it work? You notice someone has done something wrong. Instead of dismissing them, judging them, or getting angry with them, the thing you do is pause, wait a minute, do I have that inside myself?

How does this work, practically? I'll start with an easy one, I notice my kid

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1944), pp. 18-21. The version discussed here is the one reprinted in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity,* pg. 209-212. You can see it in this source sheet.

[5] Midrash Tehilim 90:7

[6] Heschel doesn't give citations and this work has yet to be annotated, but the reference is most likely to Sefer Ba'al Shem Tov al HaTorah, Parshat Breishit, #127, also found in the source sheet referenced above.

speaking to me or their sibling in a particular tone, kind of harsh, and then realize, oh, I know that tone. That's how I talk when I'm not being patient and kind. AND actually, **if** I am modeling for them patience and kindness, they might talk to one another differently. Can you apply it in your life?

A more challenging example: I took a wrong turn on a run out in the country a few weeks ago and ran out of water. I was running by a house with a "God, Guns, and Trump" sign just as a white man in his 50's outside the house was retrieving mail from the mailbox. I thought, why not? so stopped and asked if I could refill my water. He paused and said, "I'm sorry, no, I've gotten burned that way before." And then he went back towards his house. A voice in my head jumped to judgement, HA, OF COURSE! But somehow amidst my thirst I came to realize that the thing I could do in relation to that interaction to transform the world is to ask when have I [point to self] passed by or dismissed someone asking for help because I thought I was protecting myself?

The Ba'al Shem Tov is NOT saying bad things that happen to you are your fault, that you somehow deserve it. No! That is a toxic theology. He is saying first that bad things that happen in the world are an opportunity for growth and change, they can teach us something about ourselves, and they are therefore an opportunity for teshuva.

Second, and this is the core of it for me, at the end of the day, what I have control over, to the extent that I have control, is what goes on in my head and heart, which is *not* simple. But I don't have control over other people and I certainly don't have control over world affairs. So I start with myself. That doesn't mean we don't tell people - in the appropriate ways and times - when they have done something wrong or hurt us. That's a mitzvah.[7] BUT while we do start with ourselves, the Ba'al Shem Tov is also saying that doing teshuva, is what can *also* help someone else fix the thing you

[7] Leviticus 19:17: לֹא־תִשְׂנָא אֶת־אָחִיךָ בִּלְבָבֶךָ הוֹכֵחַ תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת־עֲמִיתֶךָ וְלֹא־תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חֵטְא: - Do not hate your sibling i your heart, surely rebuke your fel and do not bear sin on their account.

perceived in the first place. BECAUSE by modeling, living, being a more righteous person, you then impact other people to do the same, in ways you may never know.

OK, so THAT is the teaching of the Ba'al Shem Tov, which on its face is about the interpersonal, BUT, Heschel then applies this to World War Two! He applies this teaching about teshuva to the atrocities befalling his people and his immediate family.

"At no time has the earth been so soaked with blood." Writes Heschel, "Fellow men turned out to be evil ghosts, monstrous and weird. Ashamed and dismayed, we ask: Who is responsible?"

Heschel's answer? WE are all responsible. *NOT* guilty, but responsible. It is the same thing he would say about Vietnam. The same is true for us of the ongoing genocide in Gaza, the same is true of the authoritarian fascism that has overtaken this city and country. We are all responsible.

In making this claim Heschel says there are underlying structural issues of two kinds, they are interconnected but different. The first are the underlying structural material issues in society. "**Where were we when men learned to hate in the days of starvation? When raving madmen were sowing wrath in the hearts of the unemployed?" Heschel asks, referring to the** famine and suffering in Germany after World War One. Surely the same can be said in our times. Where were we when people learned to fear, hate, and scapegoat in the days of massive income inequality, economic insecurity, and social division? When the racism and white supremacy continued to smolder and spread before exploding into a massive fire consuming the continent?

But Heschel saw something deeper at play than the material conditions that create fertile ground for populist authoritarianism. Heschel saw in his

time what is also true in ours, **at the root of the political disaster is a spiritual disaster.**

Every single person is, as it says in the Tanya, *truly* a piece of the Divine, חֵלֶק אֱלוֹהַּ מִמַּעַל מַמָּשׁ.[8] But of course we struggle to treat one another that way, societally and also interpersonally. לַיהוָה הָאָרֶץ וּמְלוֹאָהּ[9] The earth belongs to Hashem, is her home, and we therefore belong to the earth and Hashem, but instead we rule and exploit the earth. And *simcha*, Joy, is a religious precept - עִבְדוּ אֶת־יְהוָה בְּשִׂמְחָה[10] - we are supposed to serve Hashem with JOY to live in this world with pleasure, not yoked to toil, addicted to screens, and stretched until we burnout. There is a SPIRITUAL crisis.

Heschel shares a mashal, a parable:

A group of inexperienced mountain climbers set off, without guides, trying to climb a mountain. Suddenly a rocky ledge gave way and they all fell into a deep dark pit only to be surrounded by angry, venomous snakes. Immediately they started to kill the snakes but they seemed to multiply. Strangely enough, one person stood aside from the fight and went another direction. The other climbers yelled at this person, "What are you doing?" They replied, If we remain here, we shall be dead before the snakes. I am searching for a way of escape from the pit for all of us.

We are never, NEVER, going to get out of the world the monsters are making if that is the only world that we are living in. Heschel's family is being murdered and he says, if all we do is murder the murderers it's over, we're stuck here forever. We NEED to be living into a world that we and our children and our children's children want to live in and we need to be

[8] Tanya Likuttei Amaram Chapter 2 The Tanya says it is only Jews who have a G!dly soul, but this is contradicted by it's own prooftext from Genesis when Hashem breaths the soul into the first human being וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים (Genesis 2:7) who is the ancestor to all human beings!
[9] Psalms 24:1
[10] Psalms 100:2

doing that now. Otherwise all of reality is just their world and there is no way out. That means we can't let their world take up all of our time and energy and brainspace, we can't just fill ourselves up with anger and hate in reaction, we have to live a different way and towards something else.

At this point you might ask, so we don't stop the monsters? Of course we do. Heschel certainly worked to stop the monsters of his time! He marched with Dr. King and spoke out forcefully against the Vietnam war. But he didn't do that because he was living in the monster's world, he worked for justice because he was doing so from within the meaning structure of his own world, where every single action has the ability to make this world into a fitting dwelling place for the Divine.[11]

There are two parts to living in this alternative Jewish meaning structure. First, it is understanding that at any and every moment our actions can profoundly matter. Not in relation to the monsters but instead to the people in front of us and around us and to Hashem. Every action is able to make this world a fitting dwelling place for the Divine. Second, we learn and live inside of the mitzvot that help us to meet the moment.

I want to tell you about some people I know I have seen living in this world outside the snake pit where every action can make the Divine manifest in the here and now. I think of my mom greeting every kid at the door of her nursery school with a hug and a kiss and SO those kids knew they were safe and important and loved. I think about dropping my kids off in their school where everyone - parents and teachers - are truly greeting one another with warmth and kindness and WOW, even if I walk in tired or frustrated, I walk out in a different place. They are all living the mitzvah מְקַבֵּל אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם בְּסֵבֶר פָּנִים יָפוֹת - receive every person you encounter with a

[11] The Alter Rebbe, citing and also repurposing the midrash says in chapter 36 of Likkutei Amarim that תַּכְלִית בְּרִיאַת עוֹלָם הַזֶּה הוּא – שֶׁנִּתְאַוָּה הַקָּדוֹשׁ־בָּרוּךְ־הוּא לִהְיוֹת לוֹ דִּירָה בַּתַּחְתּוֹנִים - "the purpose of the creation of the world is that the the Holy Blessed One desired to have an abode in the lower world." AND then in chapter 37, that this is dependant upon our actions and service at all times while we are in exile - תְּלוּי בְּמַעֲשֵׂינוּ וַעֲבוֹדָתֵנוּ כָּל זְמַן מָשֵׁךְ הַגָּלוּת. This is the essence of the teaching.

beautiful glowing face.[12] I was once in a jail cell with Dr. Cornell West, and the most amazing thing happened. Dr. West was behind bars and ministered to a police officer on the other side of the bars. The police officer was thinking about leaving the police and becoming a minister. Cornell West listened deeply, reflected back what he was hearing, and helped his captor on the other side of the cell find his call. This is to see someone as *tzelem elohim*, the Divine image.

I think about someone taking the mitzvah of loving one's fellow so seriously that when someone in her community got cancer she said, WE will get you through this. And then she mobilized the community and acted on that with meals, connections to support, and constant check-ins. I think about someone I've sat down with at a meal who slowly and with intention says a blessing over all the different kinds of food on their plate, and then takes a bite with great joy, so much so that it brings *me* to a place of gratitude.

OUR community does this when we make a meal train for every member of the community in need! We do this through tzedakah when someone puts out an ask for food for a neighbor in need or to help someone get out of Gaza, 5 minutes later we've collectively raised $500. We do this when we rest & have pleasure on Shabes or when we sang and danced in this room on Rosh Hashana. These actions bring out the Divine in us and among us.

All of these on their own are small things, but what holds them together is a commitment to live into a different world that no monster can touch. Because, that's the only way it can work, one action at a time, but always in every moment doing your level best to live into something other than the snake pit - that's how you create a world. AND when we create these worlds and live in them, especially when we do so together, there is an entire ecosystem that brings greater healing and wholeness into the world. That is how we find a way out.

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[12] Pirke Avot 1:16

How do we start? To do teshuva is also to live in our alternative meaning structure, which is the way out. So this Yom Kippur, start with the Ba'al Shem Tov's teaching about teshuva, with one important change, we are going to invert it. The Ba'al Shem Tov says if you see any bit of bad somewhere, if someone does something wrong, Hashem is showing it to you because it's in you. WELL, if that is true, the opposite is also true,[13] if you notice something good and beautiful in the world, if you notice kindness, care, compassion, righteousness and love, GUESS WHAT that must also be in you. Start there. SEE that good in yourself - during Kol Nidre Hashem already forgave us - וַיֹּאמֶר ה סָלַחְתִּי כִּדְבָרֶךָ,[14] Hashem sees the good in US - lets seek it out in ourselves, grow it, build on, and live into the people and world that we need.

Yom Kippur in the Torah[15] is referred to as שַׁבַּת שַׁבָּתוֹן - which translates to something like THE ULTIMATE SHABBAT - 25 hours of a ginormous Palace in Time.

My friends, on this Yom Kippur may we build a Palace in time together. And in this sacred space may we find a path to teshuva for each of us.

And lets us live into the words of Heschel from the end of his life. When he was asked how his escape from the Nazis shaped his work, he responded, "I was trained as a child...to strive to live a life, which is compatible with the mystery and marvel of human existence"

May this Yom Kippur open a portal that leads us to live lives and build worlds in the year to come that are compatible with the mystery and marvel of human existence.

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[13] Heschel asserts this is part of the same teaching, but I am unable to locate the source, in an interview with Carl Stern he says after speaking about the original teaching "vice verca—if I see something good in a person, it is a sign there is something of that good in me." interview reprinted in *Moral Grandeur,* pg. 404.

[14] Numbers 14:20

[15] Leviticus 16:31