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Dies academicus: *Revelation in the Three Monotheistic Religions*

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Some Jewish Approaches to Revelation

Michael Marmor, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Jerusalem

Jews have been reflecting about revelation for three thousand years, so it should not be surprising that any attempt to synthesize or summarize is bound to fall short of the task. The moment of encounter between the human and the Divine has been perceived and described by Isaiah, Ezekiel, the Sages of the Talmud, Maimonides and the philosophers of the Middle Ages, in the pages of the Zohar and the sermons of Hassidic rabbis, and in countless other ways. In modern times the question of revelation has been one of the key theological indicators distinguishing between liberals and traditionalists.

Today I want to approach the theme of revelation with the help of one of the most significant Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century, Abraham Joshua Heschel. Heschel was born in Poland in 1907, studied in Berlin in the 1920s and arrived in the United States in 1940, living there until his death in 1972. Heschel was a scholar and teacher with a particularly wide range of interests: he wrote about the prophets of the Bible, the sages of the Rabbinic period, the great philosophers of the Middle Ages, the founders of Hasidism, as well as developing his own distinctive theology. Heschel was highly active in the Jewish-Christian dialogue from the early '60s (Pope Paul VI actually recommended his work to a Catholic audience, and Heschel maintained close contact with a number of theologians both Protestant and Catholic). In the last years of his life Heschel became involved in many social causes, notably the struggle for black rights in the United States, for Soviet Jewry, and against the war in Vietnam.

By referring to some of Heschel's work, and by reading with Heschel some sources from within the classical Jewish tradition, we may be able to piece together a contemporary Jewish conception of Revelation, rooted in the classical tradition. We begin where our three religious civilizations begin, with Abraham.

Abraham and the Flaming Palace

In his great theological work *God In Search of Man* (1955), Heschel quotes two versions of the same *midrash* from Chapter 39 of *Genesis Rabbah*. This rabbinical parable lends itself, as we shall see, to two very different interpretations due to the ambiguity of the original Hebrew text:

Abraham may be compared to a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a palace full of light. 'Is it possible that there is no one who cares for the palace?' he wondered. Until the owner of the palace looked at him and said, 'I am the owner of the palace'. Similarly Abraham our father wondered, 'Is it conceivable that the world is without a guide?' The Holy One, blessed be He, looked out and said, 'I am the Guide, the Sovereign of the world.'

As Heschel points out in a footnote (*Search*, p.113, note7), the word *doleket* is ambiguous. It may mean “illuminated”, “full of light”, or it may mean “in flames”. According to the first reading, Heschel learns (*Search*, p.112) that “It was in wonder that Abraham’s quest for God began.” Abraham here represents the curious person full of awe, perceiving the greatness and beauty of the world and coming to the awareness that such a creation must indeed have a creator.

But Heschel is equally attuned to the second reading of the parable, according to which it is an inferno that Abraham encounters on his travels. In this reading (p.367), Abraham is an archetype of the human response to apparently uncontrollable forces which seem to threaten total destruction. “The world is in flames, consumed by evil. Is it possible that there is no one who cares?”

In these two readings of the same text relating to our father Abraham, Heschel gives voice to two key themes in his understanding of what we might call Abrahamic revelation. Here we are not concerned with the Mosaic revelation at Sinai, the great collective moment of supernatural legislation, but rather with the personal moment of revelation. Abraham’s revelation is that of the individual person facing either great light or terrible flames. In awe of the illumination or in dread of the inferno, revelation occurs.

Heschel has much to say about the phenomenology of personal revelation. The first part of *Man Is Not Alone* (1951) is devoted almost exclusively to a description of the process by which any person may come to an awareness of God. He suggests that an awareness of grandeur should leave the thinking person with an uneasy sense that not everything can be known. It is the sense of the ineffable, the inexpressible, which lies at the very heart of the religious instinct in humanity. Heschel describes a moment of personal revelation (*Alone*, p.78):

A tremor seizes our limbs; our nerves are struck, quiver like strings; our whole being bursts into shudders. But then a cry wrested from our very core, fills the world around us, as if a mountain were suddenly about to place itself in front of us. It is one word: GOD. Not an emotion, a stir within us, but a power, a marvel beyond us...

By escaping the modern dogma that an encounter with the Divine is impossible, we open ourselves to the possibility of a revelation. Unlike some Liberal theologians, Heschel does not describe this phenomenon in naturalistic terms. This is an event, a moment or serious of moments in which the overwhelming reality of God’s presence penetrates our limited human consciousness.

...we cannot comprehend it. We only know it means infinitely more than we are able to echo. Staggered, embarrassed, we stammer and say: He, who is more than all there is, who speaks through the ineffable, whose question is more than our mind can answer; He, to whom our life can be the spelling of an answer. An inspiration passes. Having been inspired never passes... (Alone, p.78)

This is one dimension of the revelation of Abraham, a moment of awe, bathed in light. And yet there is also this much darker and more painful reading of the Abrahamic revelation. It is the answer to the cry of the bewildered traveler who encounters a building in flames.

Heschel did not attempt to formulate a systematic theology out of the ashes of the Holocaust. But he did address the possibility that in bearing witness to a world in fire God might be rejected rather than affirmed. Here, then, is the other dimension of Abraham’s encounter with the palace in flames. God is encountered also in the face of

abject suffering and apparent chaos. God is revealed in the rejection of despair and absurdity.

Moses at Sinai

The Revelation described in the parable concerning Abraham has little or no specific content. It is Revelation of God's presence, not of God's will. One of the overriding characteristics of the Jewish conception of revelation has been its specificity. God speaks to the Israelites at Sinai, and in so doing legislates for a people, and for humanity.

The theophany at Sinai is the great central moment in the Jewish conception of history, a median point between the poles of Creation and Redemption. It is understood as a time of cosmic significance, a folding-in of the human and Divine domains. From within the almost endless list of questions and references to the moment at Sinai within normative Jewish tradition, I want to mention five of the biggest questions:

- Revelation and Commitment
- The Content of Revelation
- Proximity to God
- The special role of Moses
- Continuing Revelation

Revelation and Commitment

“And Moses took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people and they said: All that God has spoken, we will do and we will obey.” (Exodus 24.7)

Revelation at Sinai is not just a moment out of time: it is regarded in much of Jewish tradition as a moment at which everything changes. One midrashic parable tells of a King who rules that no Roman citizen should visit Syria, and no Syrian should enter Rome. At the creation of the world, God behaves just as this King, ruling that “the Heavens belong to God and the earth He has given to human beings”. But when God sought to give the Torah, he cancelled his original rule, and said: the lower reaches will go up to the higher reaches, and the higher sphere will descend to the lower. (Cited in Heschel, *Torah*, vol.II, p.68)

This history-making event generates not just awe and amazement, but also commitment. In a 1953 essay Heschel pointed out the difference between aesthetic and prophetic experiences:

An aesthetic experience leaves behind the memory of a perception and enjoyment; a prophetic experience leaves behind the memory of a commitment, not only of a perception. Revelation was not an act of enjoyment. God spoke and man not only perceived but also accepted the will of God. Revelation lasts a moment, acceptance continues. This, then, is given to us in Jewish tradition: not an idea of, but a commitment to, revelation. (Moral Grandeur, p.13)

Jewish destiny is here described in terms of fidelity to the memory of the Sinai moment. Being commanded is a central aspect of the Revelation, and a key component in Heschel's conception of humanity. But what does that moment convey?

The Content of Revelation

Pharisaic Judaism evolved a highly effective distinction between the Written and Oral Torah, both of which were given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. As a corollary to this notion they developed the idea of the essential timelessness of the content of revelation: there is no past and future in the Torah. Even that which a student will one day teach in the presence of his Rabbi was already told to Moses on Mount Sinai, according to a well-known Rabbinic teaching.

For moderns, the question of the content of Revelation has been a major source of contention. Biblical criticism has provided a profound challenge to the notion of the timeless and perfect Torah. A scientific and historical sensibility have made an innocent reading of the Bible as the revealed Word of God impossible for many.

Heschel's strategy of dealing with this dilemma is worthy of attention. He attempts to show that the ages-old tradition of Judaism allows for a different and less naive understanding of the concept of Revelation. He is most critical of a slavishly literal reading of the Bible, stating that this is not called for within Jewish tradition. He argues that the twin perils of literalism and a de-contextualized microscopic Biblical Criticism are to be avoided:

The essence of our faith in the sanctity of the Bible is that its words contain that which God wants us to know and to fulfill. How these words were written down is not the fundamental problem. This is why the theme of Biblical criticism is not the theme of faith, just as the question of whether the lightning and thunder at Sinai were a natural phenomenon or not is irrelevant to our faith in revelation. (Search, p.258)

Heschel dedicated a major Hebrew work to the Revelation at Sinai and its interpretation in Rabbinic literature and thereafter. The various short chapters add up to an attempt to demonstrate an attitude both non-literalist and open to the concept of historical change. What sets Heschel apart from most of his theological contemporaries is the development of these themes *within* Rabbinic literature.

For Abraham Joshua Heschel, the claims of modern scholarship are a necessary but grossly insufficient part of a contemporary religious sensibility:

Granted that the text of Scripture as handed down to us consists of gems of God and diamonds quarried out of prophetic souls, all set in a human frame. Yet who shall presume to be an expert in discerning what is divine and what is but "a little lower" than divine?

Heschel accepted the methodological advances of modernity, but not the *hubris* which seems to go along with it. He did ascribe specific positive content to Divine Revelation, and as a halachically observant Jew he regarded this content as of personal and national legislative significance. In this he differs from thinkers like his erstwhile mentor Martin Buber, who did not ascribe any specific content to the Sinai Revelation.

Proximity to God

Jewish thinkers through the ages have been much exercised by the theological challenges posed by the account of Sinai, and indeed by all other encounters between the human and the Divine domains. In the Biblical account God is by definition unknowable – we may not see Him and live. At the same time, Moses expresses well the human yearning to behold the Presence of God, to be in God's Presence. And despite the

impossibility of direct visual contact, we are told (Exodus 33.11) that God spoke with Moses face to face.

A midrash found in the ancient compilation Exodus Rabbah expresses well many of the ambiguities of the Sinai Revelation:

Rabbi Berachiah said: the tablets of stone were six spans in length. The Creator of the Universe was holding, as it were, two spans. Moses held two spans, and two spans separated between them. (Exodus Rabbah, 28.1)

This metaphor is worthy of reflection. Here the Torah becomes the way in which we are able to come as close as a human being may come to God. Not to touch God, but as it were to touch what God is touching.

The Special Role of Moses

For Maimonides, the extraordinary status of Moses our Teacher is a major article of faith. No prophet has ever or will ever reach his status. We know of literature from the period of the Second Temple, and literature preserved by the Samaritans and others, in which this highly privileged status is emphasized greatly. Perhaps in response to the rise of Christianity, it is interesting to note that in a number of ways ancient Rabbinic literature sought to play down the role of Moses, lest it be thought that he was endowed with some super-human qualities. But for the Rabbis, too, there was a difference not only of degree but also of quality separating the Mosaic Revelation from all others.

Moses is described in some sources almost as a kind of thief, breaking into the realm of the Heavens and evoking the wrath and jealousy of the angels. In some midrashic tales the angels protest against Moses and try to harm him, until God reminds them that the Torah is not intended for angels, but for human beings. The Torah is given by God, and it is taken and received by Moses. One talmudic source, repeated in various forms, states that only Moses could see through a clear or shining speculum, whereas the other prophets of Israel saw through a speculum that was somehow sullied or unclear.

Moses is then the ultimate representative of humanity in the encounter with the Divine, and at the same time he is given a special status, so that no person should believe they might ever reach his level of intimate relation with God.

Continuing Revelation

One familiar strategy by which Liberals have grappled with the dilemma of considering Sinai in the light of historical perspective and modern text criticism has been the notion of continuing revelation. Note for example the section on Torah in the Columbus Platform of the North American Reform Movement, promulgated in 1937:

God reveals Himself not only in the majesty, beauty and orderliness of nature, but also in the vision and moral striving of the human spirit. Revelation is a continuous process, confined to no one group and to no one age. Yet the people of Israel, through its prophets and sages, achieved unique insight in the realm of religious truth. The Torah, both written and oral, enshrines Israel's ever-growing consciousness of God and of the moral law... Being products of historical processes, certain of its laws have lost their binding force with the passing of the conditions that called them forth... Each age has the obligation to accept the teachings of the Torah to its basic needs in consonance with the genius of Judaism.

Heschel rejected this view, and argued against it with passion. As a modern, he did not take issue with the concept of historical development, but he believed that any attempt to flatten out all moments of revelation as being of equal significance was an affront to the deepest insights of Judaism. He expressed the view that “The term ‘continuous revelation’ is as logical as the term ‘a round square’” (*Moral Grandeur*, p.13). He preferred instead the notion of continuous understanding. “The word was given once; the effort to understand it must go on for ever.” (*Search*, p.273)

Both of these formulations, that of the Columbus Platform and that of Abraham Joshua Heschel, represent attempts to comprehend the aspects of time and timelessness inherent in the moment of Revelation at Sinai.

Revelation of the Third Kind

In closing this brief survey of some Jewish approaches to revelation, it is worth introducing yet a third category. We began with the revelation of Abraham, that moment of intimacy with God’s presence which is given to each of us, at least in potential. We proceeded to a discussion of the Revelation of Moses, that great constitutive event around which Judaism is focused.

Heschel believed in another kind of Revelation, what we might term the prophetic urge for change. A prophet for Heschel is one who shows sympathy for God’s pathos, one who is sensitive to the fact that God is in search of us, one who tries to see the world from the perspective of God.

Heschel did not suggest that he was a prophet of the magnitude of Amos or Isaiah: he would have been deeply embarrassed and ashamed by such a suggestion. And yet he did believe in a kind of contact with the will of God which could allow for a break with received tradition or accepted truths in the name of a higher justice. It was this prophetic urge which, I would suggest, led Heschel to break with the rather introspective and even chauvinistic aspects of the Chasidism of his childhood. It was this same urge which led him to express progressive opinions about the role of women in traditional Judaism, and to work tirelessly for inter-religious dialogue, stating that “no religion is an island” and that “pluralism is the will of God”. It was this urge which drove him on to speak out against the treatment of African Americans, against the war in Vietnam, and in favor of any number of unpopular social causes.

There is a third kind of revelation, after the revelation of God’s presence and God’s law. It is the revelation of God’s will for change, and God’s mandate to resist human authority when all else fails. This is of course the most dangerous and volatile form of revelation, and that which is most liable to be misunderstood and exploited for evil ends. But no account of Heschel’s approach to revelation would be complete without it.

Abraham Joshua Heschel bore in his very name and identity three legacies of revelation: the instinct of Abraham in wonder and dread before the palace of light; the generation of Moses and Joshua at the moment of collective legislation; and Heschel himself, trying to hear the voice of God from within the tumultuous events of the daily news. As heirs to this tradition, it is our privilege and challenge to inherit this name. In this particular city, at this particular time, no privilege could be greater, no challenge more daunting.