Judaism scholar Susannah Heschel on her father’s legacy

“How does a political gesture become a moment of prayer?”

Elizabeth Palmer interviews Susannah Heschel in the September 8, 2021 issue

(Courtesy of Dartmouth College)

Susannah Heschel chairs the Jewish Studies Program at Dartmouth College. She has long been active in interfaith conversations and has focused her research on Jewish-Christian debates in 19th- and 20th-century Germany. Her books include Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus*,* The Aryan Jesus*, and a book in German on the history of Jewish scholarship on Islam. She is the daughter of Abraham Joshua Heschel and has edited several collections of his writings. She wrote the foreword to* Thunder in the Soul*, a new collection published by Plough.*

With Martin Doblmeier’s new documentary film about Abraham Joshua Heschel, called *Spiritual Audacity*, and Plough’s new collection of his writings, *Thunder in the Soul*, some Christians will be encountering your father’s work and thought for the first time. Tell us about him. What was most important to him?

When my father came back from marching in Selma, he said, “I felt my legs were praying. I felt something holy in the march, and it reminded me of walking with Hasidic rebbes in Europe.” He was drawing from classical Hasidic teachings to say that every action of our lives can be transformed into prayer. My father writes, in *God in Search of Man*, that the mitzvot are prayers in the form of a deed. So the question is, How do you take something quotidian and transform it into a holy moment? That’s the question that Jewish texts ask over and over again.

In my father’s book on the sabbath, he notes that in the Ten Commandments, we’re told to make the sabbath holy. It doesn’t come to us holy; we make it holy. So then there’s a challenge: How do we make a day holy? It’s a day—not a thing, a place, or something concrete. What does life consist of? Time. What do we do with the limited time that we have, with every moment or with the day? Is it possible to pause one day a week, and turn that day, that time—which is life itself—into a holy moment?

So too with the march at Selma. How does a political gesture become a moment of prayer?

If your father were still alive, where and how do you think he might find himself praying with his legs in today’s world?

The issues that concerned him in his day are very much still with us. He was very concerned about poverty, about hunger—he worked with Jesse Jackson on Operation Breadbasket in Chicago. Racism is still very much an issue with us in this country. He would’ve been appalled by the US crimes in South America and Central America that occurred after he died. He would’ve been very concerned about US foreign policy, about peacemaking.

Do you have a favorite quote or section from *Thunder in the Soul*?

I think they’re all beautiful. People often tell me, and I feel it too, that they’ll pick up something of my father’s and it speaks to them at that moment in their lives. What shall I say? It’s not as if I am *reading* the book, it’s as if the book is *speaking* to me.

There’s an intimacy that people feel with my father’s writings. He was a very emotionally engaged person. I could go to him with a problem, and he never failed to listen intently. I felt he really cared about whatever my problem was and wanted to help me. He never belittled, never said, “You’re just a child.”

People have recently made comparisons between 20th-century fascism in Europe and recent right-wing authoritarianism in the United States and elsewhere. How useful do you find these comparisons?

“How do you take something quotidian and transform it into a holy moment?”

I certainly would not say that today we’re living in Nazi Germany. I think that’s ridiculous and stupid and dangerous. But we might recognize that Germany changed very rapidly between 1933 and 1945. February of 1933 was very different even from April of 1933, after Dachau was opened and the Enabling Act was passed and the parliament dissolved itself. Then came the boycott of Jewish stores.

I’m horrified by the fascination with Hitler that continues and the desire people seem to have for an authoritarian figure, for tyranny. Antisemitism is something different. I don’t think antisemitism in America today can be compared to Nazi Germany, by any means. For one thing, antisemitism in Nazi Germany was a directive from the top of the government. It involved all government agencies. We don’t see that in the United States.

On the other hand, I think that there is a legacy of trauma. For Jews to overcome the trauma of the Holocaust is going to take quite a few generations. The trauma of racism has affected all of us who live here. If you’re Black, your life is at stake every minute of every day, and that’s a horrific trauma. If you’re White, you’re living with that awareness of the racism that you’re participating in, and that’s also a trauma.

Historically, Christians have had a pretty bad track record when it comes to loving and supporting and protecting their Jewish neighbors. How do you think Christians are doing today with respect to antisemitism?

There are many Christians who have shown tremendous interest in Judaism and warmth toward Jews. That’s extraordinary. It’s very new. In the early 1990s, when I taught a seminar on Christians and Jews at the University of Frankfurt in Germany, I looked for something positive said by Christians about Judaism. It was about impossible to find anything. Now there’s a lot.

In what we call interreligious or interfaith dialogue, it is important to remember I don’t just present my Judaism to Christians and try to show them how to change the way they think. I also change the way that I think about Judaism. Interreligious discussion is also about, “How can I change?”

At the same time, too often in interreligious dialogue, liberals talk to liberals, and conservatives talk to conservatives. We don't talk across these lines, even within our own communities. Jonathan Sacks, a rabbi hailed as a great interfaith leader, would happily sit down with the Dalai Lama—he did—but he wouldn't sit down with Reform rabbis or Jewish feminists to talk about the problems that we face in Judaism. Why is that? To me, that's a huge problem: when interreligious is not intrareligious.

You are one of the signers of a working document called the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism, which is framed as an alternative to the 2016 International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance statement defining antisemitism. Why do you think a new or more nuanced definition of antisemitism is necessary, and what do you hope the Jerusalem Declaration will add to current conversations?

One of the reasons that I decided to sign the Jerusalem Declaration was that I was seeing activists accuse BDS [boycott, divestment, sanctions] supporters of hate speech and develop legal claims against them. Hate speech is one thing—and I know it well—but political views regarding Israeli politics are another. I've been to national academic conferences where there were BDS resolutions. Most of the people supporting a BDS resolution knew nothing about Israel and Palestine; they had never heard of the Balfour Declaration. They just thought, "This is a justice issue; I'll sign."

To then say that support for BDS is antisemitic, even somehow illegal, is too harsh. What we need instead is understanding, education, conversation—and we have too little of that right now.

We have a tendency to become our opinions; instead of merely having them, we embody them. Then if someone

doesn't like my political view, I am the enemy. It's that kind of transformation of a political view into a human enemy that's very dangerous.

If an American Christian approached you to ask for advice on how to talk about Israel and Palestine, what would you offer?

There used to be things called teach-ins, in the 1960s, about Vietnam. We were against the war in Vietnam, but nobody knew anything about the Vietnamese people and their culture and the conflicts that they were facing in terms of China, for instance. It was a part of the world that was unknown to us.

So if you want to do something, let's begin by reading books, taking some classes, bringing in speakers from both sides, getting some background. Pay attention to the larger context: To what extent is the conflict about Israel and Palestine, and to what extent are they pawns in the hands of the United States, Europe, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and so on?

Beyond educating ourselves, there are a huge number of peace groups to get involved with—some in the United States, some in Europe, some in Israel, some in Palestine. There are peace-themed summer camps for Israeli and Palestinian children—there's one in Maine. There's a women's group that observes at the checkpoints which tends to calm down Israeli soldiers, for instance. There are lots of Jewish-Muslim dialogue groups.

There are also organizations that provide concrete help: medical supplies to Gaza or therapy to kids and adults who have been traumatized. You can adopt a refugee family or an Israeli or Palestinian student at a local university. You don't have to have a million dollars to donate; you can just donate your heart and your time and your energy. And you can also talk: raise the question, make a suggestion at your local church or synagogue that you sponsor a dialogue.

One thing to avoid is the notion that "if only they were Christian, they could get along" or "we Christians know about reconciliation, so we can solve this."

What's next in your own research?

I have an article coming out called "Exile of the Soul." The Romans never issued an edict of exile saying that the Jews had to leave the land of Israel, and Jews have always lived there, even if in small numbers. Exile is not a political state; it's not that I am forbidden through 2,000 years to go to Israel. But it becomes something that is inside of me. The motif of exile has been taken up by other people, including in the Black church. Psalm 137, "By the waters of Babylon, there I sat down and wept," has become extremely important in musical traditions. So I am interested in the question of how I feel exile in my soul, as an existential state.

In your introduction to *Thunder in the Soul*, you write, "The Torah comes to each of us, a revelation of God that we receive, each in a unique way, renewed every day. . . . One cannot be Jewish the way one's grandparents were Jewish; that would be spiritual plagiarism." Tell us about how this reality has played out in your life.

It is an old Jewish tradition that the Torah is given to us all but each person receives it in a unique way. So each person's Torah is different. How is the Torah reflected in my life? The answer for me is different from everybody else, the way no two faces are identical.

The idea of spiritual plagiarism comes from *Man Is Not Alone*. My father is talking about the Kotzker rebbe, about whom he wrote a two-volume Yiddish book at the end of his life. The rebbe says being Jewish like somebody else is like wearing somebody else's shoes. This was in the early 19th century, when you couldn't put on somebody else's shoes because the leather was in the shape of their feet.

For religion to be authentic to who you are, you have to know who you are. That was the starting point for my father: Who am I, what is the mandate of my life? Such questions guided his life. Why was I created? Why was I brought out of Nazi Germany? To do what?

When I was growing up, it was clear to me that I was excluded from much of Judaism as a woman. That bothered me. My father always agreed with me. He actually suggested that I become a rabbi. I said, "I don't think they're going to take women." He said, "I think they will."

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Opportunities for Jewish women in terms of study and prayer, ordination, all of these things just didn't exist when I was growing up. There are women now who are ordained Orthodox rabbis, as well as Conservative and Reform. There are women who study Talmud and are experts at Talmud. When I was child it was forbidden for a woman to study Talmud. It was inconceivable.

How have you experienced a sense of calling in your own life?

In 1986, when I was a graduate student, I was invited to join a group of professors and students to go for two weeks to East Germany for religious dialogue. There were seven of us. We traveled, giving lectures and meeting people—Christians and a few Jews as well.

At the end of the two weeks, we were back in East Berlin for a two-day event organized by the Lutheran Church. Each of us gave a talk, and there was a lot of discussion. There were hundreds of people present. These were people who were

not at all used to Jewish-Christian dialogue, and they were not very receptive. There was a lot they didn't understand and didn't like about Judaism and Jews. They had a lot of biases and clichés and negative stuff. It was tough.

In the afternoon—this was Shabbat afternoon during the coffee break—I was talking to the two organizers, who were both ministers, Elisabeth Adler and Rainer Graupner. I asked them, "How are we going to conclude today?" Having experienced interreligious dialogue in the United States, I suggested we have some kind of a prayer together.

Elisabeth said, "We can say the Lord's Prayer." I said, "No, no, no; that's a Christian prayer. This is interfaith."

Rainer said, "I'll read a psalm. I'll read it in German, and then you can read it in Hebrew." I thought that was a good idea. So we chose a psalm, and at the conclusion of the lectures and discussion, when everyone was exhausted, he read the psalm in German and I read it in Hebrew.

I had this feeling in the room, in the atmosphere, that it wasn't yet over, that people somehow still needed something. So I whispered to Rainer, "Maybe you should say the Lord's Prayer now."

He whispered, "Really, are you sure?"

I said, "Yes, I think they need it."

So he turned to this room, and he told them what happened—the whole story, what Elisabeth had said and what I had said. Everybody stood up. They knew the Lord's Prayer from memory, and everybody started reciting it in German, in a very slow, quiet way. When they came to the line, "forgive us our sins," people were crying. I was crying. Everybody was crying. Because they knew what we were talking about. We were talking about the Holocaust, about Nazi Germany.

We'd had these abstract lectures and discussions. And now all of a sudden their hearts, which really had been shut off that weekend, opened up. They felt it, and their hearts started crying. All of a sudden, the whole weekend meant something. The whole room was transformed.

I realized then what it is to be ordained. I felt that I had been used by the Shekhinah. I had been a channel to transform a room religiously, to transform people.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Questions that guide a life.”