

Three Excerpts from
In This Hour: Heschel's Writings in Nazi Germany and London Exile
by Abraham Joshua Heschel

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Excerpt #1: The Idea of Jewish Education (690 words)

Excerpt #2: On Return (420 words)

Excerpt #3: On Suffering (570 words)

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The Idea of Jewish Education
by Abraham Joshua Heschel

The text of Abraham Joshua Heschel's speech on The Idea of Jewish Education, delivered in London in the months between his July 1939 escape from Poland and his passage to the United States in 1940, was recently discovered among his archived papers. Never before published, it responds to the trauma of the destruction of European Jewry with a call for return, not to the lands of the past, but to the ancient, sustaining, enduring spiritual reality of Jewish learning. The following text is excerpted from that speech, which is reproduced in full within In This Hour: Heschel's Writings in Nazi Germany and London Exile by Abraham Joshua Heschel (The Jewish Publication Society, June 2019).

What is the purpose of Jewish education? Reading texts is not an end unto itself. They are not merely educational materials or literature. It does not mean using Jewish libraries, and researching in archives.

The purpose of educational work is to maintain and enrich Judaism's memory and to enable the individual to participate in this memory. What does that mean?

Not only the individual, but the community, too, possesses a memory. The power of that memory is also a measure of the strength of our culture. The ideas and experiences that we were granted over the course of our long history have not been forgotten. The memory of our people has preserved these ideas. Independently of what we knew and what we wished, these ideas were carried forth. The storing of the Spirit, the content of Judaism's memory, is the educational material that nourishes us. What has been written down into books is like the body. The soul exists only in the act of transmission. The books are only signs, notes. It is the aliveness of the Jew that makes music from it.

The Spirit we are talking about is intimately interwoven with its bearer, with the Jewish community. It is borne by the Jews. This means that in this relationship Israel is both the bearer and the Spirit that is borne. They depend on one another

for their existence. That is the meaning of the transmitted tradition of the Jews, the living interpretation of the eternal teaching.

A Jew must be aware of this if he wants to come to clarity in his relationship with God. For us, Jewish literature is not a dead past but the immediate present.

We are not indebted to the archaeologists for the biblical writings that we read today. They did not first have to be excavated like a collapsed temple out of the rubble of antiquity. Ever since they were written down, throughout our entire history, we have stood in engagement with them. We approach them differently than we do, for example, the old Egyptian hymns. There is something in us that answers when we are seized by the words of our literature. To the Jew it sometimes seems as if a memory is being awakened in him.

The vital sources of Jewish education are not the books but the people, the bearers of memory. The essence of education is not in the letters, but in those who engage with the Spirit and bear witness to it. The duty of Judaism is to educate the Jews to be bearers of that which has been passed down. Being educated means to be bearers of the Spirit. Without a living tradition, as Jews we would go under. This is why the break with the tradition is so dangerous to our survival.

One thing is clear: education is not identical to knowledge. Education means formation, education shapes the person. But the fact that one possesses knowledge is not a sign that someone has been formed. Education is not a thing but a process, an act. Education *happens* to a person.

The Jews call the happening of education *learning*. The commandment to learn is not the demand for a certain quantity of knowledge or a number of catechism articles. Not the product, but learning itself is what matters. Learning is a service in and of itself.

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On Return

by Abraham Joshua Heschel

Abraham Joshua Heschel's essay, "On Return," was recently rediscovered among his archived papers. It was written in London, in the months between his July 1939 escape from Poland and his passage to the United States in 1940. Heschel's response to the trauma of the destruction of European Jewry is a call for return, not to the lands of the past, but to the ancient, sustaining, enduring spiritual reality of Jewish learning. The following text is excerpted from that essay, which is reproduced in full within In This Hour: Heschel's Writings in Nazi Germany and London Exile by Abraham Joshua Heschel (The Jewish Publication Society, June 2019).

We have been challenged by the darkest powers, and no indignity could be more shameful than crawling away. What is our answer?

The answer to expulsion is return—to the Jewish community, to the Jewish spirit, to the Jewish land.

What has happened in all these years? After the World War we mourned the innumerable people who had lost their lives. But we didn't mourn the living who, in the turmoil of that time, had forfeited their conscience. In those years the voice of the heart was silenced, the vision of the spirit was frowned upon. To speak of goodness was deemed hypocrisy; the idea of love, ridiculous illusion. Reason was rendered impotent, and one didn't really know: Is evil evil? Is goodness good?

Ghosts spread over the ruins of values. Power and hatred took up residence there, and soon they conquered an entire Reich. In this Reich there was no place for Jews.

So they were expelled. And the answer to expulsion is return. This means: to be a Jew. But what does being a Jew mean? Is it only a biblical fact, a matter of blood? Being a Jew is not a given of nature but a manifestation of the Spirit. Being a Jew is not only an inheritance but above all an act of acquisition. We inherit affinity and strength; we attain goal and achievement. We inherit the soul, but we attain the Spirit.

To be a Jew means to be of the Jewish Spirit, to be close to the Spirit that reveals itself in Jewish life and scripture. Only in this closeness can Jewish action be realized, can Jewish achievement endure. And that is why the pursuit of Jewish scripture and shared learning, and the path to one's own Jewish life, are a function of life, a question of Jews' being or not being.

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On Suffering

by Abraham Joshua Heschel

Susannah Heschel recently discovered Abraham Joshua Heschel's essay, "On Suffering," among her father's personal papers. The German typescript is not dated, but presumably it was written before Heschel made his way to the United States, as he rarely wrote in German once he arrived in his new home. The following text is excerpted from that essay, which is reproduced in full within In This Hour: Heschel's Writings in Nazi Germany and London Exile by Abraham Joshua Heschel (The Jewish Publication Society, June 2019).

Suffering confers neither a patent of nobility nor an obligation to purify oneself. It is a task that some may fail, but which may also be one's salvation. How is this task to be met? What can we create out of suffering?

To experience the intensity of one's own pain is not the meaning of suffering but rather a sign of danger. To be immersed in pain can lead one to the prison of the soul or to the freedom of community. It is left to the suffering person to recognize darkness or light.

Great and minor suffering, loss and unhappiness, deprivation and defeat – these lead us to the kingdom of true life, to community with others in harmony with God. In suffering, one experiences friendship, community, and God.

The path to community leads through personal suffering. Suffering is not the goal, but the path. It is narrow and steep, between the abyss and the peak. An ever-clearer view of humans and animals, of all creatures who are our brothers in suffering, is revealed to one who makes the ascent from pain and torment. All beings encounter one another on the paths of suffering, and we also encounter Him, who is with us in suffering. We have to be careful not to find a home in pain and to drown our thoughts in feelings. We should not enter into the maze of meditation on justice and injustice. The task given to the suffering person is to direct himself to suffering people, to see them in the fire of his own suffering, to see for others, both near and distant. Suffering breaks the circle of egotism in which our heart has been confined. The revelation of the Other is granted us. We see his life, we see his suffering.

That is the view into the distance. We see the direction of the straight path of suffering leading upwards. Shedding the worship of the Self, giving up our illusions, we foster our ability to question our own conscience, to ask what is lasting in our own Self, what is essential in our own will, in our own life.

Slipping on this steep and narrow path of suffering is a constant danger. We will be misled by vanity, by a feeling of hatred. We misuse suffering to stir people up against the community, to spite the Spirit, to harden ourselves against meaning and direction. The Self becomes frozen in resentment. Instead of ascending the path, it allows itself to be seduced by a feeling of powerlessness and plummets into darkness. Instead of peace with the world, there arises discord with the universe.

Suffering is not a judgment but a test. Its outcome lies in our hands. God has determined to lead us into suffering, and man must choose which path to take within it....