Something is Asked of Us

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One of the formative influences in my theological education was Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a formative voice in Biblical studies with his studies of the prophets, the Sabbath, and the human quest for the divine.

Born in Warsaw in 1907, Heschel attended the University of Berlin in 1934 just as the Nazis were gaining power in Germany. In 1940, he came to the United States to teach at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York and became active in the civil rights and peace movements of the 1960s, where he became friends with Martin Luther King, Jr.

One of Heschel's primary theological interests was to study the relationship between God and humankind. He believed that a spark of the divine exists within each person. If that is true, we cannot harbour hatred for any other person. How important it is for us to recapture this sense of the divine sacred within each person. It may be difficult to see the divine in some people, perhaps, but it is increasingly necessary in our polarized world.

This point of view provided the impetus for Heschel to become actively involved in the social and civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s. It was a concrete way to show our concern for that same spark of the divine in those who are different from us. He walked alongside King in the march from Selma to Montgomery for voting rights. He recalled feeling as if his "legs were praying."

I quickly came to understand how critically important Heschel's insights were to help us discern that the call of ancient Israelite prophets continued to be powerfully relevant in contemporary times.

His experiences as a Jew in Poland and Germany at the time of the Nazi ascendancy, led Heschel to point to the ultimacy of discerning the divine spark in life. He was appalled at the complacency he saw in America, the same kind of complacency we see in our world today. In his writings and speeches, he tried to shock modern people out of that complacency. It was time to wake up to the spiritual dimension of life, which was fading from contemporary consciousness.

He cultivated an ethos of radical astonishment. How can modern people regain a personal awareness of God? How can we get more deeply in touch with that sacred spark which exists in all? How do we recapture a sense of astonishment at the life of the divine within the lives of human beings, a sense of astonishment which we have lost in the drive to explain life in purely material terms?

He taught us to see again ways to reclaim the experience of the sublime in different ways—the grandeur of nature; the full–throated laughter of children; the caress of a lover; the care of another person. In so many of life's experiences, the divine is present, and in the presence of the sublime, we stand in wonder and awe.

Heschel understood wonder as the alternative to expediency. People have a choice: we can live in the way of expediency where we ask how the world can serve us and how we can exploit the world for our own gain; or we can choose the way of wonder in which we are fundamentally filled with a sense of gratitude for this sublime gift, and in which we know that we are indebted and understand that something is asked of us of us, a sense that we are called to serve.

For Heschel, the Old Testament prophets taught and modelled this kind of authentic spirituality for us. He understood fully that this kind of spirituality is not some mystical act on

our part in which we seek God; rather, it is a growing awareness that God is seeking us and reaching out to us.

This relationship with the God who seeks us is the heart of any kind of faith. Faith is not a set of propositions, or a collection of doctrines, or a set of truths about God or us. It is not an assembly of a set of values, or general norms and rules for behaviour. Rather, the prophets invite us to consider what Heschel called "the divine pathos," from the Greek root meaning emotion or feeling or passion. For the prophets, God is deeply involved with God's beloved people, with all their aches and pains and hurts and disappointments, and God determines to remain faithful to us amid it all. Heschel dares to believe that this is the deep truth of who God is.

Heschel challenged modern humanity to become equally aware of the divine pathos and live with the same prophetic hunger for a life of holiness, of gratitude, and of being called to serve.

One of Heschel's most common aphorisms is the title of this column: "Something is asked of us." The first time I heard it, I couldn't help but wonder whether Kennedy's famous line in his inaugural address had been inspired by Heschel: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."

Imagine if people began to ask that question again in these times. Ask not what life can do for you. Rather, ask how we might enrich and enhance life for all creatures as in wonder and awe we discern the divine spark within each of us and all of us.

Finally, Heschel understood sabbath as a way of fostering wonder as an antidote to expediency. Wee need sabbath time, this cathedral of time in which we reconnect with creation and its creator. Sabbath time transforms us, makes us whole, and renews us after six days of being shattered into tiny pieces by the demands of the world.

I was delighted a few weeks ago to see a PBS documentary of Heschel, this modern prophet of radical astonishment and wonder. I can only hope others saw it and understood his contemporary relevance.