

# A Magisterial Volume

Neil Gillman



Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Heavenly Torah As Refracted through the Generations*, Edited and Translated with Commentary by Gordon Tucker with Leonard Levin. (New York, London: Continuum, 2004) \$95, 848 pp.

FROM THE MOMENT this hefty (800 plus pages) volume, with its striking scarlet cover, arrived in my office some three weeks ago, the reactions of students and colleagues who stream in to chat were unanimous: “Finally! It’s done? Wow!” The publication of this book, the fruit of over a decade of work, and coinciding with the 100th anniversary of Heschel’s birth (1905), and his 32nd *yahrzeit*, is an event!

“It” is a one-volume, slightly condensed (by eliminating repetitions, redundancies, and some proof-texts), English translation of Abraham Joshua Heschel’s magisterial three-volume study of the doctrine of revelation in the literature of the talmudic rabbis. The original three-volume Hebrew version, published respectively in 1962 and 1965 by Soncino Press and in 1990, posthumously, by the Jewish Theological Seminary, had long been one of those monumental scholarly efforts that students and scholars worship from afar. Very few students of rabbinic theology had the patience or the language and textual skills to master Heschel’s archaic, rabbinic Hebrew, the wealth of original ancient, medieval and modern rabbinic, philosophical and kabbalistic sources that he assembles, and the intricacies of his argumentation — and all of this in three volumes, no less.

For Heschel to have devoted this time and energy to a study of revelation is an explicit recognition of the primacy of that issue in Jewish theology. How one understands revelation determines how one deals with the authority of Torah in Judaism. Not incidentally, it is also a key to how one understands God and God’s role in history. It is a point of entry into all of Jewish theology.

But to refer to this work as a study of revelation in talmudic literature does not even begin to capture the scope of what Heschel has bequeathed to us. The core of his inquiry is the juxtaposition of two theological paradigms that he identifies with two giants of the age of the *Tannaim*, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael. But, as translator and commentator Gordon Tucker emphasizes, Heschel’s concern

is less with the substance of the positions as they were articulated in the statements attributed to these two teachers, nor with the historical accuracy of these attributions, but mainly with the paradigms themselves, and the tensions and interweavings of these two ways of constructing the life of faith, as they appeared throughout Jewish intellectual history to Heschel’s own day.

Of these two paradigms, the one identified with Rabbi Akiva affirms that every letter of Torah, even the crowns over the letters in the Torah scroll, represents a distinct Divine revelation with its own discrete content. In contrast, Rabbi Ishmael insists that the language of Torah has its own intrinsic structure that even God must obey: “The Torah speaks in human language.” The decisive issue, then, as Tucker points out, was the status of religious language — an issue that remains central to philosophy of religion to this very day.

Even more significant, is Heschel’s life-long struggle to argue for the indispensability of the *Aggadah*, or more generally, of theology itself for the study of Jewish religion. Those of us who were privileged to study with Heschel and who are familiar with his personal history will appreciate that this struggle was an issue on which he staked his entire career. Precisely because of his stature as a theologian, he suffered more than most from those who would reduce Jewish theology to an irrelevancy, or who would echo that familiar refrain, “It’s not important what you believe. Judaism is a religion of action.” This volume demonstrates that the origins of this debate lie in Judaism’s foundational texts.

This volume is far more than a simple translation. Each of the 40 chapters is prefaced with a “Translator’s Introduction” in which Tucker summarizes the content of what is to come. Heschel’s own footnotes are supplemented by Tucker’s — both at the bottom of the page. At the end, we are given six appendices: abbreviations, rabbinic authorities (Babylonian or Palestinian and by generation), medieval and modern authorities, a glossary of Hebrew

*continued on page 11*

## Koret Book Review

The Koret Foundation – *Sh'ma* literary pages include literary essays, author interviews, and book, film, or art reviews that complement the Koret Jewish Book Awards and provide visibility and distinction to a wide range of Jewish books and authors. These pages feature an array of writers and others who bring our readers new expressions of Jewish thought, imagination, and spirit.

Visit [JBooks.com](http://JBooks.com) for reviews, interviews, and excerpts.

Neil Gillman is Professor and Chair of the Department of Jewish Philosophy at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and Chair of the *Sh'ma* Editorial Committee.

January 2005  
Shevat 5765  
To subscribe: 877-568-SHMA  
[www.shma.com](http://www.shma.com)

# Canvassing in Fear, Voting with Faith

Hadar Harris



THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION of 2004 was as much about voting for a vision of one's chosen candidate as it was about ensuring that the other guy didn't win. Implicit in this was a tension between faith and fear. Americans vote because we have faith in the electoral process. We participated in a grassroots campaign because we believed that our votes would make a difference. But we were fearful about the process — reports of lost absentee ballots, rigged electronic voting machines, and inadequate numbers of poll workers — and the results, another presidential election decided by the Supreme Court. Was my own campaign activism an act of faith or an act of fear?

Why did I spend a full day standing in the hot sun in front of a K-Mart in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, registering voters? What motivated me to spend hours trudging through rainy neighborhoods knocking on doors to determine voter trends in Waynesville, West Virginia? What made me crazy enough to leave my house at 2:00 A.M. to spend Election Day in one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in Philadelphia to ensure that minority voters were able to cast their votes without interference or harassment?

The barbershop-turned-polling place, where I spent Election Day, was on a corner in West Philly, one block from a devastating fire that 20 years ago burned down a series of row houses. With only shuttered shells of buildings still visible, nearly 80 percent of the precinct showed up to vote. By 7:00 A.M. there was a line in front of the barbershop. People came before work with sleepy children in their arms — elderly people came with walkers, young people with their pants resting gingerly on their narrow hips; the blind were brought in by their family members. People told us that this was their first-time-ever voting.

Miss Lillian, the Election Judge, was amazed that the turnout was more than double the numbers from 2000. Asked why people had come to vote, she said they were afraid of what would happen if they didn't.

A few days before the election, a reporter called me from Canada to discuss the election. She wanted to know "why this was one of the most corrupt elections in American history." She was disappointed that I refused to give her the quote she sought. I told her that yes,

there were bound to be irregularities at the polls. Yes, I was disturbed by the reports I had heard of fliers with intentional misinformation about who was eligible to vote, where polling stations were located, or Election Day. But, I told her, unfortunately there have *always* been irregularities in U. S. elections. Voters have *always* been intentionally disenfranchised. Unfair election practices have *always* taken place. This year, though, attention was being paid and resources devoted to monitoring and documenting these problems, and trying to fix them. The Election Protection Coalition received thousands of complaints on its national hotline on Election Day. And reports of voter intimidation, ballot problems, and fraud are being investigated and will hopefully impact changes in future elections.

And while 49 percent of Americans may be fearful of what happens now, we must have faith in the way the democratic process functions, the engagement of hundreds of thousands of individuals in grassroots mobilization efforts, and the thousands of new voters who registered and cast their ballot for the first time.

*Hadar Harris, a member of the Sh'ma Advisory Board, is Executive Director of the Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Law at American University Washington College of Law in Washington, DC. She worked as an election monitor for the UN/OSCE Joint Mission to the first parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan.*

## Book Review, from page 13

terms, and modern authorities Heschel cites.

Finally, that decades after Heschel's death, a book should appear with a front cover that identifies the author as simply "Abraham Joshua Heschel," should not be taken for granted. Only on the inside title page do we discover the names of the editors and translators. This act of generosity on the part of Rabbis Tucker and Levin must be acknowledged. But of course, this is entirely Heschel's book, and that is cause enough for radical amazement.

*Please send  
witty,  
clever,  
Purim humor  
to [Sberrin@JFLmedia.com](mailto:Sberrin@JFLmedia.com)  
by February 1st*

January 2005  
Shevat 5765  
To subscribe: 877-568-SHMA  
[www.shma.com](http://www.shma.com)