

The Lurianic Background of the Concept of Divine Pathos in Abraham Joshua Heschel's *The Prophets*

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Abstract: Abraham Joshua Heschel's volume, *The Prophets*, is one of the seminal works of Jewish biblical scholarship that opened the way for the development of Jewish biblical theology, with his discussion of divine pathos as a key concept in biblical prophecy. It has had wide impact on biblical theology in general, but most scholars are not familiar with the importance of Heschel's background as a Hasidic Rebbe and its impact on his work, particularly his understanding of divine pathos. This paper traces the background of the development of Heschel's concept of divine pathos in *The Prophets*. It begins with a brief treatment of Heschel's early life in Poland, where he was born into a Hasidic family, his early studies in Jewish Enlightenment literature, and his doctoral studies at the University of Berlin, from which he was forced to flee to the United States prior to World War II. It continues with a discussion of Heschel's concept of divine pathos, i.e., the interplay between divine compassion and divine justice, which stands as the basis for his study, *The Prophets*, published in English in 1962. The paper then turns to a critical discussion of Heschel's concept of divine pathos and its application to the prophetic writings in the *Bible*. It examines the major concepts of the Ten Sefirot in the Zohar, Lurianic Kabbalah, and their role in Hasidic thought. It then points to the expression of

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evil as an aspect of G-d's character in prophetic texts, such as Hosea 1-3; Isaiah 6; and Jeremiah 2:7-18, that is characteristic of Lurianic Kabbalah and stands as a key issue in Heschel's understanding of divine pathos in the interpretation of the *Bible* and later Jewish tradition.

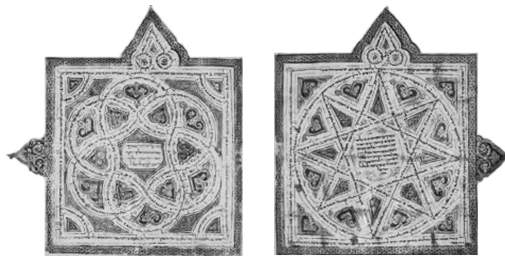
Key Words: Divine Pathos, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Lurianic Kabbalah, *The Prophets*, Ten Sefirot

I

Abraham Joshua Heschel's (1907-1972) volume, *The Prophets*, is one of the seminal works of Jewish biblical scholarship that opened the way for the development of Jewish biblical theology, with his discussion of divine pathos as a key concept in biblical prophecy.^① *The Prophets* was originally written in German at the University of Berlin as Heschel's doctoral dissertation and published in 1936 in Krakow, Poland, and in Berlin, Germany.^② It came to wide attention when Heschel expanded the work and translated it into English in 1962. Most biblical scholars, whether Jewish or not, know the work well, but most are not familiar with the background of Heschel's understanding of divine pathos in Lurianic Kabbalah. Such an understanding is key to the development of Heschel's further work in Jewish philosophy and spirituality following his dissertation, which provides the foundations for developing a dynamic relationship between G-d and humanity in the larger context of the

① Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper and Row; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1962); Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper Torchbooks; Harper and Row, 1971).

② Abraham Heschel, *Die Prophetie* (Kraków: Nakładem Polskiej Akademii Umiejetności, 1936); Abraham Heschel, *Die Prophetie* (Berlin: Erich Reiss Verlag, 1936).



world of creation.^①

This paper attempts to trace the background of the development of Heschel's concept of divine pathos in *The Prophets*. It begins with a brief treatment of Heschel's early life in Poland, where he was born into a Hasidic family and was destined to become a Hasidic Rebbe, his early studies in *Haskalah*, i.e., Jewish Enlightenment literature, and his doctoral studies at the University of Berlin, from which he was forced to flee to the United States prior to the outbreak of World War II and the Shoah (Holocaust). It continues with a discussion of Heschel's concept of divine pathos, i.e., the interplay between divine compassion and divine justice, which stands as the basis for his study, *The Prophets*, first published in German in 1936, expanded and translated into English in 1962. The paper then turns to a critical discussion of Heschel's concept of divine pathos and its application to the prophetic writings in the Bible. It examines the major concepts of the Ten Sefirot in the Zohar, Lurianic Kabbalah, and their role in Hasidic thought. It then points to the expression of evil as an aspect of G-d's character in prophetic texts, such as Hosea 1-3; Isaiah 6; and Jeremiah 2: 7-18, that is characteristic of Lurianic Kabbalah and an ongoing issue in Heschel's understanding of divine pathos in relation to post-Shoah theology in the interpretation of the *Bible* and subsequent Jewish tradition.

II

The two-volume biography of Heschel, written by Edward K. Kaplan and Samuel H. Dresner for the first volume and Kaplan alone for the second following the death of Dresner, provides an overview and analysis for

^① See, e.g., Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1951, 1976); Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1951, 1984); Abraham Joshua Heschel, *G-d in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1987); Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Israel: An Echo of Eternity* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1967, 1968, 1969); Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Maimonides: A Biography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1982); Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Heavenly Torah: As Refracted through the Generations* (New York and London: Continuum, 2007).

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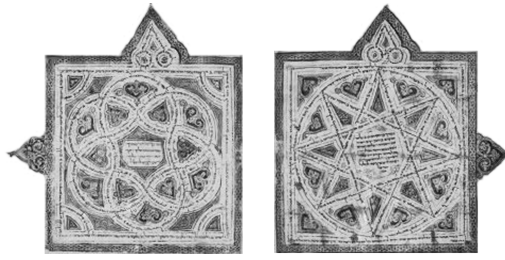
Heschel's life and work.^①

Abraham Joshua Heschel Heschel (1907-1972) was born in Warsaw into a Hasidic dynasty that could be traced back prior to the early years of the Hasidic movement.^② His father was R. Moshe Mordecai (1873-1916), the Pelzovizna Rebbe and a descendant of the Heschel dynasty, and his mother was Rivka Reizel Perlow (1874-1942), a daughter of the Perlow dynasty (descended from R. Dov Baer of Mezeritch [1710-1772], the Maggid of Mzeritch). It was customary at the time to name a child after a distinguished ancestor, including the ancestor's family name, and then to attach the family name afterwards, hence the double appearance of the name, Heschel. He was the sixth child and second son of the family, who was named for his great great-grandfather, R. Abraham Joshua Heschel (1748-1825), the Rebbe of Apt (Polish, Opatow), who emerged as a major Hasidic leader of the third Hasidic generation following the death of the founder of Hasidism, R. Israel ben Eliezer, the Baal Shem Tov (Besht, ca. 1698 or 1699-1760). The earliest namesake for the family was Rabbi Joshua Heschel of Kraków (d. 1664). Although Heschel was born in Warsaw, his family home was in Medzibozh (Polish, Miedzyborz), located in Podolia Province, Ukraine, where the Apter Rav was buried next to the Baal Shem Tov.

Heschel's sisters included Sarah Brakha (1891-1964), who married R. Abraham Joshua Heschel (1888-1967), the Rebbe of Kopitzhinitz; Esther Sima (d. 1942); Gittel (d. 1942); Devorah Miriam (d. 1943); and his brother was R. Jacob Heshel (Anglicized name, 1903-1970), who married Sarah bat Nahum Mordecai Friedman, the Rebbe of Tchartkov, a descendant of the Friedman dynasty (descended from R. Levi Yizhak of Berditchev [1740-1810]). His grandfather was R. Abraham Joshua Heschel (1832-1881), the Rebbe of Zinkov, and his grandmother was Leah Rachel bat R. Shalom Joseph Friedman, the Rebbe of Sadegora, another descendant of the Friedman

① Edward J. Kaplan and Samuel H. Dresner, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Prophetic Witness* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1998); Edward K. Kaplan, *Spiritual Radical: Abraham Joshua Heschel in America* (New Haven, CT, and London, UK: Yale University Press, 2007).

② For discussion of Heschel's family and early years, see Kaplan and Dresner, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, x-xii, 1-72.



dynasty. His great-grandfather was R. Meshullam Zusya Heschel (1813-1866), the Rebbe of Zinkov, and his great-grandmother was Sima bat R. Moshe Zvi of Savaran. His great great-grandfather was R. Yithak Meir Heschel (1770-1855), the Rebbe of Zinkov, and his great great-grandmother was Miri bat R. Haim Jacob Strauss.

Heschel was recognized from childhood as an *Illui*, “a prodigy,” who would grow up to become a *Zaddik*, a righteous man in the Hasidic tradition who embodied the teachings of Torah, and a Hasidic Rebbe like his ancestors. His father was known for his opulent clothing, deliberately worn to attract the attention of the Evil One, who would then leave other more poorly dressed persons alone, combined with his piety and his empathy for the poor. Heschel’s father accepted only modest remuneration for his work, and made sure that no money would remain in his house at the end of the day when he gave any remaining coins to the poor. Heschel viewed his father’s piety and empathy for the poor as an inspiration for his own understanding of divine pathos in *The Prophets*.^①

But in 1916, the German army occupied Warsaw during World War I, and a typhus plague soon followed. On November 16, Heschel’s father died from typhus, shortly before Heschel turned ten. With the death of his father, Heschel’s uncle, R. Alter Israel Shimon Perlow, the Novominsker Rebbe, took over his education, which differed markedly from that of R. Moshe Mordecai. Whereas R. Moshe Mordecai had emphasized the joy and optimism of the Baal Shem Tov, R. Alter Israel Shimon emphasized the Kotzker Hasidic tradition of anxiety in the observance of Torah. The tension between the two models proved to be a major factor in Heschel’s own humble personality and his understanding of Jewish tradition.

When Heschel was born, Jews constituted over 40% of Warsaw’s population. Although Warsaw was heavily populated by Hasidic Jews, it was also a modern metropolis, and the Jewish world of Warsaw was also heavily influenced by the currents of the *Haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment, that saw waves of philosophical, literary, and political rationalism, especially following the Communist revolution of 1917 and the overthrow of the Czarist

① Kaplan and Dresner, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 17.

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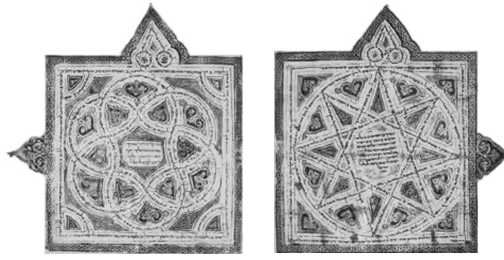
Dynasty that ruled the Russian empire. Many Jews had left the Russian Empire, including Poland, for the United States, Ottoman Turkish Palestine, and other locations, during the Czarist persecution of Jews following the assassination of Czar Alexander II in 1882, and they continued to do so following the Communist Revolution. Others, including Heschel himself, began to turn increasingly to the study of Haskalah ideas and literature. Heschel began to write poetry and literature in Yiddish and Hebrew, such as his 1925 Yiddish piece, *Der zaddik fun freyd*, “The Zaddik of Joy,” which explored the conflict between joy and anxiety in his own soul, and works of philosophy, such as his biography of Moses Maimonides, first published in German in 1935, a popular work, in which he explored similar tensions in the life and work of one of Judaism’s foremost philosophers.

Heschel made his way to Vilna (Lithuanian, Vilnius), Lithuania, the so-called Jerusalem of Lithuania, which was known for its Talmudic scholarship. But Vilna was also known for its strong reputation in Haskalah studies. Heschel enrolled in the Mathematical-Sciences Gymnasium (Polish, Matematycsno-Przyrodnicze Gymnazjum), where he studied mathematics, the sciences, literature, languages, etc., in preparation for entering a European university. Apart from shaving his beard, Heschel did not give up his Jewish-Hasidic identity while studying in a secular Jewish environment, and he remained plagued by the tension within his identity.

Upon passing his examinations in Vilna in June, 1927, Heschel relocated to Berlin, where he began his studies at the University of Berlin and simultaneously at the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judenthums, a Jewish college that trained liberal rabbis and scholars. He was also heavily influenced by David Koigen, a philosopher of Jewish history and culture, who lectured independently. Although the tension between the two sides of his Jewish identity remained, he managed to hold them together as expressions of his service to G-d.^①

At the University of Berlin, Heschel concentrated on philosophy and esthetics with Max Dessoir and Heinrich Maier, biblical criticism and Semitic languages with Alfred Bertholet and Eugen Mittwoch, and art history with

① Kaplan and Dresner, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 96.



Erich Brinkmann and Wolfgang Köhler. At the Hochschule, he concentrated in Jewish philosophy with Julius Guttmann. Heschel submitted his dissertation on “Die Prophetie” for defense, and he passed his examinations on February 23, 1933, with an overall evaluation of *Sustinuit*, “Sufficient.” But this period saw the rise of the Nazi party in the German government, and it became difficult for him to publish his dissertation, which was a requirement for receiving his degree. While searching for a publisher, David Koigen passed away. Heschel subsequently wrote his biography of Maimonides in 1934, in which he opposed the common understanding of Maimonides as a rationalist and portrayed him instead as an ethical and spiritual figure yearning for G-d. Finally on March 23, 1936, Heschel’s dissertation was co-published by a German press under the title, *Das prophetische Bewusstsein*, and by a Polish press under the title, *Die Prophetie*.^① The publication of his doctoral dissertation enabled Heschel to receive his doctorate from the University of Berlin.

III

Although Heschel received his doctorate at Berlin due to the publication of his dissertation, his troubles in Germany were not over. Due to the rising power of the Nazi government in Germany, it was impossible for him to secure a position at a German university and it was also clear that his safety—and that of all Jews—was in question. He was forced to flee Germany for the United States. He was able to leave Germany for London on July 13, 1939, where he stayed with his brother, Rabbi Jacob Heshel, and his family. After considerable difficulty, Professor Julian Morgenstern, President of the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Ohio, secured a position for him, which enabled him to secure a visa as well. Heschel left for the United States on March 9, 1940. He was unable to secure visas for his mother, or his sisters, Esther Sima, Gittel, and Devorah Miriam, all of whom ultimately perished in

^① Abraham Heschel, *Das prophetische Bewusstsein* (Berlin: Erich Reiss Verlag, 1936); Abraham Heschel, *Die Prophetie* (Kraków: Nakładem Polskiej Akademii Umiejętności, 1936). For discussion see Kaplan and Dresner, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 229-236.

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the Shoah.

Heschel remained at Hebrew Union College for some five years until he joined the faculty of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York in 1945. His biography on Maimonides and his study on Prophecy were both well received in Europe, despite the atmosphere of antisemitism during the war. As he adapted himself to life in the United States, he would ultimately expand and translate his study on *The Prophets* for publication in 1962.

Heschel's study on *The Prophets* focused on the concept of divine pathos^①, which he argued represented the prophet's understanding of the character or attitudes of G-d rather than their ideas about G-d.^② Divine pathos represented the interaction of two key aspects of the divine personality. The first is passion, in which G-d gives expression to an emotional convulsion as G-d seeks an intimate relationship with the human being, formed in G-d's image. Such an expression would entail the emotion of divine love or compassion in the relationship between G-d and human beings in which anger might be expressed on G-d's part, but always with the expectation of human repentance. This leads to the other dimension of the divine personality, ethos, in which G-d gives expression to justice that will not call for irrational and irresponsible action on G-d's part when justice is not served. Heschel refers to ethos as G-d's "moral nature."^③ In Heschel's view, divine pathos is inherently transitive in that it requires an object—and that object is the human being, i.e., G-d seeks a relationship with the human being that gives expression to both divine passion and divine ethos. The human being then functions as "a consort, a partner, a factor in the life of G-d."^④ The G-d of the prophets is not "the Wholly Other," but one who is "involved, near, and concerned."^⑤ In short, prophecy is G-d meeting the human being. Divine pathos is therefore "like a bridge over the abyss" that separates G-d from the human being.^⑥ It entails that the relationship between G-d and human beings is not dialectic, but

① See esp. Heschel, *The Prophets*, 2:1-11.

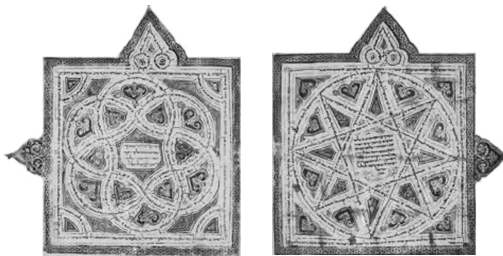
② Ibid., 2:1.

③ Ibid., 2:5.

④ Ibid., 2:6.

⑤ Ibid., 2:7.

⑥ Ibid., 2:9.



it may be characterized by opposition and tension.

Heschel concludes his initial discussion of the theology of divine pathos with the following:

In sum, the divine pathos is the unity of the eternal and the temporal, of meaning and mystery, of the metaphysical and the historical. It is the real basis of the relationship between G-d and man, of the correlation between Creator and creation, of the dialogue between the Holy One of Israel and His people. The characteristic of the prophets is not foreknowledge of the future, but insight into the present pathos of G-d.^①

Heschel's discussion of individual prophets includes Amos, Hosea, Isaiah 1-39, Micah, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and Second Isaiah. His focus is on G-d's relationship with Israel and G-d's dissatisfaction with Israel's behavior in relation to the covenant between G-d and the people. He avoids Ezekiel, on which his biblical studies advisor, Bertholet had published a commentary at the time that Heschel completed his dissertation^②, and a number of the Twelve Prophets, such as Jonah and Nahum, who were concerned with the punishment of the nations, and Joel, Obadiah, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, all of whom were considered later by biblical scholars of the time. It would appear that Heschel's selection of prophets best represented in his mind the two major elements of divine pathos, viz., divine passion and divine ethos or judgment.

A few examples will illustrate his treatment of the prophets named here.

Heschel treats Amos along the classical lines of modern critical scholarship as a prophet concerned especially with social justice. Amos decries corruption in the Israelite court system which denied the under classes of the people their economic and legal rights due to them in the covenant according to Amos 6: 1-7. G-d expresses divine compassion for Israel by redeeming the people from Egyptian bondage and leading them through the wilderness to the promised land of Israel, but the people corrupted G-d's Nazirites and ordered

① Heschel, *The Prophets*, 2: 11.

② Alfred Bertholet, *Hesekiel*, HAT I: 13 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr/Paul Siebeck, 1936).

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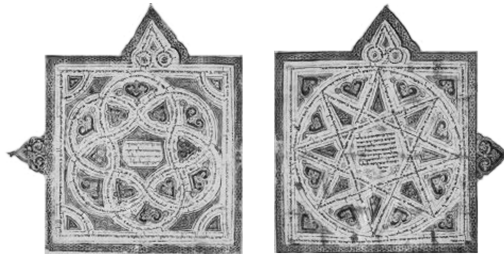
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G-d's prophets to remain silent in Amos 2: 10-12. Because Israel is G-d's chosen people, G-d chose to punish them among the nations for their iniquities in Amos 3: 1-2. Nevertheless, G-d was willing to forgive the people if they asked for mercy as expressed in Amos 7: 2-3, 5-6.

Hosea lived during the eighth century B.C.E. when the Assyrian empire rose to power and Israel sought protection from its enemies by allying with Assyria rather than relying on G-d. G-d consequently accused Ephraim, the power tribe of the northern kingdom of Israel, metaphorically of conducting itself like a harlot who seeks relations with strange men and is thereby defiled in Hosea 5: 3; 6: 10; and 9: 1. Corruption was widespread throughout the nation according to Hosea 7: 7, and Ephraim was acting like a silly dove in flitting back and forth to seek protection or power from nations like Egypt and Assyria, which only encouraged them to take control of Israel and plunder them at will according to Hosea 7: 11; 12: 2. Such conduct would only lead to exile according to Hosea 11: 5. Although there was tension between G-d's compassion and justice, G-d stood ready to accept Israel's repentance and return according to Hosea 14: 1-4.

Heschel likewise treats Isaiah 1-39, generally understood to represent the work of the eighth century B.C.E. Judean prophet, Isaiah ben Amoz, as another expression of G-d's dissatisfaction with Israel's—or Judah's—behavior, while standing ready to protect the people and to recognize their repentance. King Ahaz ben Jotham of Judah relied on his treaty with the Assyrian empire to protect his kingdom from enemies, but Isaiah condemned such reliance on foreign powers as a betrayal of Judah's intimate relationship with G-d, i.e., a covenant with death, in Isaiah 28: 15 and called instead for justice and righteousness in keeping with G-d's instruction in Isaiah 28: 16-17. Assyria would openly blaspheme against G-d, and G-d would bring down the Assyrian empire in Isaiah 10: 15-11 and 14: 24-27. G-d makes it clear that G-d is tired with false piety when the people ignore G-d's requirements for justice and care for the poor in Isaiah 1: 11-15. And G-d portrays the divine Self metaphorically as a close friend, who tended a vineyard, i.e., Israel, that ultimately produced no fruit despite G-d's loving care. But in the end, Isaiah 36-37 illustrate how G-d actually did defeat the Assyrian empire when it invaded Judah using motifs from the Exodus narrative concerning G-d's



liberation of Israel from Egyptian bondage in 701 B.C.E. when King Hezekiah repents.

Finally, Heschel's treatment of Jeremiah emphasizes the tension in the relationship between G-d and the prophet when Jeremiah attempts to refuse G-d's commission as a prophet, although G-d ultimately insists that Jeremiah will do as he is told in Jeremiah 1: 4-19. G-d's anger against Jerusalem and Judah are clear throughout the book, e.g., as illustrated by the image of a storm from G-d that will descend upon the nation in Jeremiah 23: 19-20 and Jerusalem will be left desolate in Jeremiah 7: 33-34. Nevertheless, G-d's love for Israel—and Jerusalem and Judah—are also apparent throughout the book when G-d recalls divine love for Israel, metaphorically portrayed as G-d's bride in the wilderness according to Jeremiah 2: 1-3. G-d nevertheless expresses extreme frustration with the people, accusing them of faithlessness, adultery, etc., in Jeremiah 5: 7-9; 28-29. G-d expresses extreme sorrow at the need to punish Jerusalem and Judah for its alleged infidelity in Jeremiah 12: 7-13; 8: 18-23. But G-d nevertheless stands ready to take the people back if the people will repent and return to G-d in Jeremiah 4: 1-2.

IV

Overall, Heschel's *The Prophets* portrays a compassionate G-d who is forced to decree judgment for a beloved people that employs free will to make the wrong choices. But interpreters often overlook the Jewish theological background in which the interplay between divine compassion and divine judgment find their expression in the Hasidic movement from which Heschel emerged, i.e., Lurianic Kabbalah. Although the Baal Shem Tov is often portrayed as a joyful Jewish spiritualist unconcerned with the study of Jewish tradition, his successors gave far greater attention to Jewish tradition in general and the Kabbalistic tradition in particular in developing later understandings of Hasidic thought.^① Until the pioneering work of Gershom Scholem beginning in the mid-twentieth

^① For a comprehensive study of Hasidism, see David Biale et al., *Hasidism: A New History* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018).

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century^①, Jewish interpreters viewed kabbalistic thought as an expression of Jewish superstition, magic, and nonsense.^② Consequently, interpreters paid little attention to the role of Hasidism and Kabbalistic thought in their evaluations of Heschel's thought during his lifetime and beyond.

But the dialectical thinking in which Kabbalah understands the major components of the divine personality and their influence in the human being provide the foundations on which Heschel's understanding of the interplay between divine compassion and divine ethos or judgment are based. Consequently, an understanding of the Ten Sefirot, i.e., the ten emanations of the divine personality in the Zohar and their portrayal in Lurianic Kabbalah are essential for understanding the interplay between divine compassion and divine judgment in Heschel's conceptualization of divine pathos.

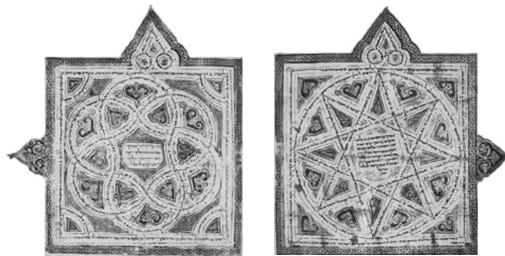
The Zohar was written to portray the esoteric teachings of the second century CE. Tannaitic Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, was actually authored in the late-thirteenth century CE by the Spanish kabbalist, R. Moshe ben Shemtov de León of Avila, who died ca. 1290 CE.^③ Building on earlier kabbalistic tradition, such as the *Sefer ha-Bahir* and other works, de León wrote the Zohar as an expression of R. Shimon bar Yohai's teachings on the esoteric meaning of the Torah during the thirteen years he hid with his son in a cave following the Roman genocide against the Jewish people in the Bar Kochba War of 132-135 CE.

A key aspect of the Zohar was de León's development of the Ten Sefirot, "the Ten Countings" or "the Ten Emanations" of the personality or character of G-d that infused all of creation, including human beings, with the divine presence. The Ten Sefirot were ten characteristics of G-d that aided in

① Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1941, 1961).

② See now Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988); Marvin A. Sweeney, *Jewish Mysticism: From Ancient Times Through Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020).

③ For discussion of the Zohar, see esp. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 156-243; Sweeney, *Jewish Mysticism*, 285-324. For the Zohar in translation, see esp. Daniel C. Matt, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, 12 vols. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004-2018); Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts*, 3 vols. (Oxford and Portland, OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1989).



explaining how the infinite character and presence of G-d could be manifested in the finite world of creation. They focused on the ideal, intangible principles that underlay finite and tangible creation. The Zohar's conceptualization of the Ten Sefirot employs the Aristotelian ethical principal of "the golden mean" to organize the Sefirot into three triads, i.e., mental, moral, and material, in which two ideal opposite principles would be balanced by a third. Consequently, each ideal Sefirah or principle is defined in relation to its opposite.

The Ten Sefirot proceed from the infinite character of G-d, identified as the *Ein Sof*, "without end, boundary," which generates the first three, "mental" Sefirot. This begins with the *Keter Elyon*, "Crown of the Most High (G-d)," which constitutes an expression of "the will of G-d" to engage in the creation of the finite world. The *Keter Elyon* then generates two ideal aspects of thought that stand in tension but work together in creation, *Hokhmah*, "wisdom," which constitutes the theoretical aspect of thought that conceives and plans, and *Binah*, the practical aspect of thought that takes conceptualization and fashions it into tangible reality.

The three mental Sefirot then generate the three moral Sefirot. The first two constitute an ideal pair held together in tension by a balancing third. *Hesed*, "fidelity, compassion, mercy," which constitutes the ideal principal of giving in the moral realm of action, and *Gevurah*, "power," also known as *Din*, "judgment," which constitutes the ideal principle of punishment or taking. *Hesed* and *Gevurah/Din* are then held together by the balancing principal, *Tif'eret*, "beauty," so that ideal giving or good and ideal taking or evil are held together in tension and defined in relation to each other as opposites.

The moral Sefirot then generate the third material triad of Sefirot. Again, the first two constitute an ideal pair held together by a balancing principal that holds them together in tension. *Netzah*, "endurance," expresses the tangible principal of dynamism and change in the material world, and *Hod*, "majesty," expresses the tangible principal of stability or the lack of change in the material world. The two are held together in tension by *Yesod*, "foundation," which expresses a balanced interplay between dynamism and stability in the material world. The material Sefirot might be compared to the interaction of Yang,

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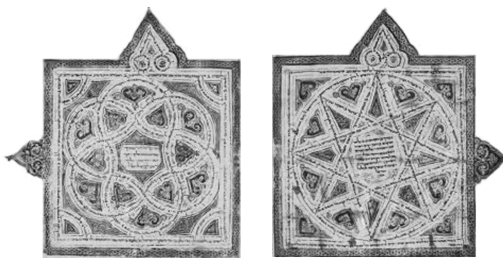
male dynamism, and Yin, feminine stability, in Chinese thought or the interplay of Shiva, “the destroyer (changer),” and Vishnu, “the preserver,” generated from Brahman, in Indian philosophy.

When the three Sefirotic triads are functioning together smoothly to produce a balanced expression of the emanations of the divine, they produce the tenth Sefirah, *Malkhut*, “(divine) kingship,” also known as *Shekhinah*, “(divine) presence,” to signify the holy presence of the infinite G-d in the finite world of creation, including human beings. The *Zohar* then explains the emergence of evil in the world as a disruption of the balanced functioning of the Ten Sefirot, e.g., when human beings sin as a result of their use of free will, *Gevurah* or *Din* is released from its balance with *Hesed*, thereby releasing evil or punishment into the world of creation.

Because the *Zohar* is composed as R. Shimon bar Yohai’s esoteric commentary on the Torah, the presentation of the Ten Sefirot in the *Zohar* remains unsystematized. But the sixteenth century kabbalist, R. Isaac Luria of Safed (1534-1572), also known as Ha’ashkenazi Rabbi Yitzḥaq, “the Ashkenazi Rabbi Isaac,” or simply, ha-’Ari, employed a mythologically-based portrayal of how the Ten Sefirot were fashioned and disrupted to represent G-d’s exile from the world and the task of human beings to restore the divine presence to creation.^① As a true mystic, Luria never recorded any of his oral teachings, but his disciple, Ḥaim Vital, recorded them. Nevertheless, it is not always certain whether Vital’s writings present Luria’s own teachings or Vital’s interpretation of those teachings.

Vital’s presentation of Luria’s teachings posits that creation takes place when G-d fashions ten clay vessels, representing the Ten Sefirot, and then attempts to pour divine light into each of them. But the divine light is so powerful that seven of the vessels shatter, scattering sparks of divine light and fragments of the vessels throughout creation. This portrayal is metaphorical in that the three surviving vessels represent the three Mental Sefirot, viz., *Keter Elyon*, *Ḥokhmah*, and *Binah*, and the seven shattered vessels represent the Moral and Material Sefirot as well as the tenth Sefirah, *Malkhut* or *Shekhinah*. The presentation presupposes that the finite vessels intended to hold the Moral and

① For discussion of Lurianic Kabbalah, see Scholem, *Major Trends*, 244-286; Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul: Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and His Kabbalistic Fellowship* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); Sweeney, *Jewish Mysticism*, 325-362.



the Material Sefirot as well as the presence of G-d were too weak to do so. Thus the *Shevirot ha-Kelim*, “the Breaking of the Vessels,” represents the disruption of the Sefirotic system and results in the exile of the holy presence of G-d from the finite world of creation. According to Luria, G-d’s attempt to create the world by pouring out the divine Sefirot into finite vessels represents an expression of divine love and G-d’s desire for companionship.

But the shattering of the vessels and exile of G-d, known as *Tzimtzum*, “contraction, withdrawal,” in Lurianic thought, left G-d and the world of creation fractured, disjointed, and in need of repair, with evil left unchecked in the resulting chaos. Consequently, the Lurianic system posits that human beings, using their capacities for knowledge as expressed through the surviving Mental Sefirot, must act to gather the sparks of the divine scattered throughout the world and to reassemble the seven shattered vessels that will result in the restoration of the Moral and Material Sefirot together with the tenth Sefirah, the holy presence of G-d, to the world. Holy action in accordance with the teachings of G-d’s Torah, “Instruction,” enables *Tikkun Olam*, “the repair of the world,” in Lurianic thought.

In Ḥasidic thought, it is the task of Jews to begin the repair of the world through holy thought and action to ensure the restoration of the holy presence of G-d to the finite world of creation. When viewed from this perspective, it becomes clear that Heschel’s understanding of the roles of divine compassion and divine justice within the larger concept of divine pathos, presuppose Lurianic teachings concerning the Sefirot, particularly the Moral Sefirot of *Ḥesed*, “fidelity, compassion, mercy,” and *Gevurah/Din*, “power, judgment,” that work together within the personality or characteristics of G-d as expressed in the prophets.

V

Heschel’s conceptualization of G-d in *The Prophets* entails a G-d who is in need of the human being to act as a partner with G-d in the completion of

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creation.^① In Heschel's view, G-d is always concerned with the human being, even when rendering judgment against humans for cause^②, and in this regard, G-d is always good. But the portrayal of G-d above in Lurianic Kabbalah envisions G-d as somehow impaired by the disruption of the Sefirot, which allows *Gevurah/Din*, "power, judgment," the capacity to escape from the dialectical relationship with *Hesed*, "fidelity, compassion, mercy," and to act independently. One might argue that the independence of *Gevurah/Din*, "power, judgment," would then leave the remaining character of G-d essentially good in keeping with its overwhelming *Hesed*. Heschel maintains that divine justice does not lead to "irrational and irresponsible action" on the part of G-d, but instead indicates that all of G-d's actions are just.^③ But more recent experience with post-Shoah theology indicates that there are times of divine absence or inaction, such as the Shoah when some six million Jews perished without evidence of divine action to protect them.^④ G-d might have been present during the Shoah, as many pious Jews might maintain, but G-d did not act decisively.

With such concerns in mind, one might also ask if any prophetic texts illustrate this point. Three texts in particular stand out in this regard, i.e., Hosea 1-3; Isaiah 6; and Jeremiah 2: 7-18, all of which are treated in one way or another by Heschel in *The Prophets*.

Hosea 1-3 recounts G-d's instructions to the late eighth-century BCE prophet, Hosea ben Beeri, to marry a woman of harlotry and to have children with her, each of which is named to highlight an aspect of northern Israel's abandonment of YHWH for alliance with the Assyrian empire, which entails recognition of other gods.^⑤ The passage appears to presuppose the alliance of Israel with Assyria during the reigns of King Jehu of Israel (842-815 BCE) and

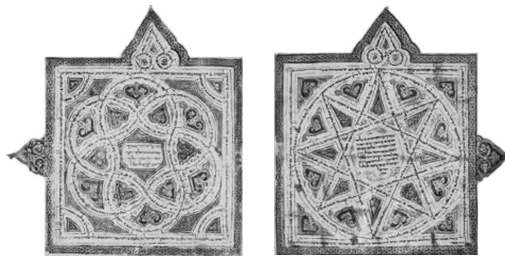
① Heschel, *The Prophets*, 2: 15, 2: 6; cf. Heschel, *Man is Not Alone*; Heschel, *G-d in Search of Man*.

② Heschel, *The Prophets*, 2: 21.

③ *Ibid.*, 2: 5.

④ Marvin A. Sweeney, *Reading the Hebrew Bible after the Shoah: Engaging Holocaust Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008).

⑤ For discussion, see Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets*, 2 vols. (Berit Olam; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2000), 1: 3-40.



King Shalmaneser III of Assyria (859-824 BCE). Shalmaneser III attempted repeatedly to cross the Euphrates River to invade Aram, which successfully repelled the Assyrians repeatedly with the help of its allies, including King Ahab ben Omri of Israel. But when the wars against the Assyrians proved to be far too costly and led to the death of King Ahab in battle and the wounding of his son, King Jehoram ben Ahab of Israel, Jehu led a revolt that overthrew the house of Omri, suffered invasion and subjugation from his erstwhile ally, King Hazael of Aram, and ultimately turned to Shalmaneser III for an alliance that would protect Israel from Aramean attack. Hosea was incensed by this move, and argued that Israel had abandoned YHWH like his wife, Gomer bat Diblaim, whom he charged with adultery for her alleged relationships with other men.

Heschel spends little time with Hosea 1-3, but argues that G-d rightly charged Israel with abandonment and longed for reunion with her.^① But one may ask some rather pointed questions about Jehu's alliance with Assyria. Where was YHWH when Aram attacked Israel and subjugated it through invasion? YHWH had a covenant with Israel, noted in Hosea 2:1-2, which cites YHWH's covenant with Jacob, the eponymous ancestor of northern Israel, in Genesis 28:13-15, in which YHWH promises to increase Israel's numbers and to protect Israel from enemies. But YHWH didn't do that when the Aramaeans invaded, and Jehu sought protection from Assyria instead. Furthermore, neither Israel nor Gomer have any voice in Hosea 1-3—or elsewhere in the book—to explain why she had to seek protection from Aram in the case of Israel or support from other men in the case of Gomer. Jehu's alliance with Assyria suggested that YHWH had become an unreliable covenant partner, and Gomer's relations with other men suggest that maybe Hosea was not a very good husband.

Heschel has nothing to say about this issue. But in the aftermath of the Shoah, it is a key question in Jewish thought. Indeed, it is the same question asked by Jews in the aftermath of the Spanish expulsion of Jews in 1492, not to mention the Roman genocide of Jews following the Bar Kochba Revolt of 132-135 CE, the Crusader massacres of Jews in the Rhine Valley in 1098 CE,

① Heschel, *The Prophets*, 2: 50-51.

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and the pogroms launched against Jews in Europe following the outbreak of the Plague in 1346-1353.

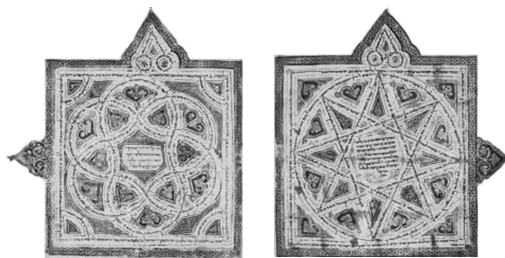
A second text would be Isaiah 6: 1-13, which portrays the vision of YHWH by the late-eighth century Judean prophet, Isaiah ben Amoz.^① Isaiah envisions YHWH enthroned in the Jerusalem Temple, calling for volunteers to speak on YHWH's behalf to the people of Jerusalem and Judah. When Isaiah volunteers for the mission, YHWH informs him that he is to render the people blind, deaf, and dumb, so that they will not repent nor save themselves from punishment so that YHWH's glory may be revealed to the world at large in aftermath of the collapse of the Babylonian empire in the late-sixth century BCE as announced in Isaiah 40-55. Isaiah, apparently shocked at what he is asked to do, asks YHWH, "how long?" and YHWH responds with statements that punishment will last until only one tenth of the people will be left.

YHWH's proposal entails another case of destruction; indeed, the verb root, *Sha'ah*, "to destroy," appears repeatedly in YHWH's statements to the prophet in the last verses of Isaiah 6, which appears to announce an early example of Shoah in Isaiah's time. Heschel discusses the passage, and notes its contradictions. But in the end, he justifies YHWH's statements by asserting that hardening of the heart for punishment is often caused by man himself. But the moral contradiction is serious here. YHWH's statement indicates that the passage presupposes teleological ethics, i.e., that end result justifies the means to achieve the goal, insofar as later generations will see the glory of G-d, although a number of generations will perish in order to achieve this result. Such a scenario violates ontological ethics, which ask whether or not an action is moral in its essence or being (ontology), and YHWH's proposal is not ontologically just.

Again, Heschel allows a moral problem to slip without argument, and the result is an early example of the deliberate sacrifice of several generations of Jews, in this case due to YHWH's desire to reveal divine glory to the world.

The final example is Jeremiah 2: 7-18, the last of Jeremiah's complaints

^① For discussion, see Marvin A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1-39, with an Introduction to Prophetic Literature*, FOTL 16 (Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 1996), 132-142.



against G-d.^① Jeremiah served as a prophet of YHWH in the late-seventh and early-sixth century BCE, when he witnessed the decline and destruction of Jerusalem and Judah at the hands of the Babylonian empire. He is a reluctant prophet throughout the book. One might understand his reluctance to witness the destruction of his homeland and the death and exile of so much of its population due to the Babylonian invasions of the early sixth century BCE and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jerusalem Temple. But YHWH insists that Jeremiah serve as prophet throughout the book, and Jeremiah does so, however reluctantly.

The key issue in Jeremiah's charges that G-d had seduced, overpowered, and raped him as if he was a woman, and left him pregnant, metaphorically, with the word of G-d that he cannot withhold within himself just as a pregnant woman is powerless to stop the birth of her child. Rape is a crime in the Torah as specified in Deuteronomy 22: 23-29, and it entails penalties for the rapist depending on the circumstances of the rape. Heschel discusses the passage, and argues that it ultimately constitutes a call to serve as a prophet and that it portrays the dialectic (of compassion combined with justice in divine pathos) his characterization of G-d throughout his study.^② But one must also ask if YHWH engages, even metaphorically, in what would be considered an immoral and evil act in order to achieve the divine goals. Here, Heschel recognizes the interaction of good and evil in G-d's treatment of Jeremiah in terms fitting with those of Lurianic Kabbalah as discussed above, although he does not mention Lurianic thought at all.

G-d appears to have an evil dimension in the divine character, much as the disruption of the holy divine presence of G-d would have been disrupted in Lurianic Kabbalah. G-d does indeed need human beings in Heschel's understanding of divine pathos to undertake not only the repair of the world but the repair of G-d as well.

^① For discussion, see Marvin A. Sweeney, *Jeremiah*, 2 vols. Illuminations (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, forthcoming, 2025), ad loc.

^② Heschel, *The Prophets*, 2: 113-114.

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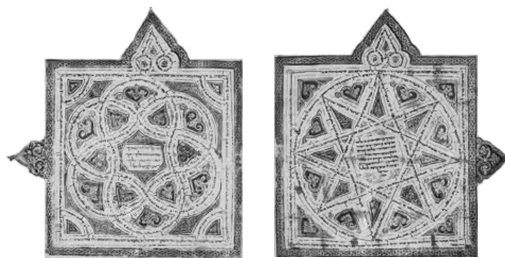
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VI

In sum, divine pathos is the key concept that underlies and informs Abraham Joshua Heschel's study of the Prophets. But the above arguments demonstrate that Heschel's understanding of divine pathos is firmly rooted in Kabbalistic understandings of the workings of Ten Sefirot, i.e., the Ten Emanations of the Character of G-d, in the finite world of creation, human beings, and the prophets themselves. In Lurianic Kabbalah, it is clear that the task of human beings is to act as a partner with G-d in undertaking *Tikkun Olam*, repair of the world, to restore the Holy Presence of G-d to the finite world. Nevertheless, Heschel's work leaves open a key theological question, viz., to what extent does G-d also need humankind to undertake the task of repair of the divine? In the aftermath of the Shoah, this is one of the key questions that faces the contemporary Jewish world, and indeed, the worlds of Christianity and Islam as well.

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