

# International Day of Study

## Leader's Guide: Abraham Joshua Heschel's *The Sabbath* “A sanctuary in Time”

**Background Information**  
**Abraham Joshua Heschel**  
**1907-1972**

### Early Years

Abraham Joshua Heschel's religious and intellectual roots can be traced to the Hasidic dynastic world of his childhood in Warsaw, Poland. His early education was steeped in traditional Jewish learning and infused with a mystical predilection and devotion that remained with him throughout his life. Demonstrating a precociousness not atypical for that time and place, he was ordained at the age of sixteen and seemed destined to follow in the footsteps of his forebears. He was, however, diverted from this course of religious and cultural traditionalism, and eventually moved to the University of Berlin where he joined a cadre of young men similarly fleeing the traditional world of Eastern Europe.

### Rabbi, Philosopher, Poet

After receiving his doctorate and a second (liberal) ordination, Heschel embarked upon a career of teaching, editing and writing, which included such disparate fields as philosophy and poetry. He fled the rise of Nazism to London, and was soon brought to the United States (1940), thanks to the tireless efforts of Julian Morgenstern, the president of Hebrew Union College. He settled in Cincinnati and served as a professor of philosophy and rabbinics at HUC until 1945. Uncomfortable with the Reform Movement's position on *halakhab*, Heschel left HUC for the Jewish Theological Seminary of America where he remained until his death in 1972.

### At the Jewish Theological Seminary

Heschel's arrival at JTS just after World War II coincided with the waning of one of its principle luminaries, Mordechai Kaplan. Kaplan's influence on the student body, and on Conservative Judaism in general, had been profound and extensive, offering an ideological system to the new generation of American-born rabbis that permitted them to function in the modern age without compromising their religious and intellectual ideals. Heschel's mystically-tinged approach to Judaism was a radical departure from Kaplan's modern liberal theology and practice.

Despite Heschel's popularity among the student body, he was never completely comfortable at JTS. As a Hasid and philosopher in a faculty of rational Lithuanian-*yeshivah*-trained scholars, some historians of the institution suggest that his field was devalued by colleagues who felt the critical study of classical rabbinic texts was *the* foundation of a first-rate rabbinic education. While Heschel was acquainted with the tools of scientific scholarship, he could never escape the institutional prejudices against the study of philosophy and theology.

Nevertheless, despite what some believed was a diminished status within the faculty, Heschel's charismatic personality extended beyond the walls of the Seminary, and his philosophy and writings were embraced by a much wider audience of Jews and non-Jews alike. He was the first Jewish scholar appointed to the faculty of the (Protestant) Union Theological Seminary (1965-66).

Heschel's political and social activism in the 1960s served as another source of conflict with his colleagues. An ardent civil rights advocate who marched with Martin Luther King in Selma, and an outspoken critic of the Vietnam War, Heschel's public positions endeared him to generations of students who were attracted to his activist positions.

The Jewish world was stunned when it heard that Abraham Joshua Heschel died in his sleep at the age of 65, on *Shabbat*. His daughter, Susannah Heschel, writes in her introduction to the 2005 edition of Heschel's work, *The Sabbath*: "In Jewish tradition, dying on the Sabbath is a gift that is merited by piety. For the pious person, my father once wrote, it is a privilege to die."

## Heschel's Philosophy

Neil Gillman (*Sacred Fragments*, page 128) situates Heschel within the field of experientialist philosophy. Heschel's interpretation of Judaism is developed in his two major philosophical works, *Man is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion*, and *God In Search of man: A Philosophy of Judaism*. In these and other philosophical writings, he explores the ongoing and often-elusive relationship between man and God, a relationship in which man struggles to know "the ineffable" and one in which God struggles to remain a partner in man's work in the world. This interaction generates religious experiences. Gillman writes on this point:

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Heschel is convinced that we all have such experiences. And the central function of a religious tradition, its institutions, liturgies, sacred texts, rituals, and communal structures is to create settings that will stimulate the experience and preserve the memories it leaves behind. The Sabbath and Festivals, for example, and the rituals of daily prayer impel us out of our everyday living and create "sanctuaries in time" wherein we can look at ourselves and our world anew.

(*Sacred Fragments*, page 132)

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## Heschel's Writings

Although most of Heschel's works were written while at JTS, he was not in the fullest sense identified with Conservative Judaism. His influence within the movement, nevertheless, was extensive and his writings remain popular among generations of its theologians, rabbis, students, and lay readership. His style was poetic and impressionistic, presenting biblical and rabbinic literature in an idiom deeply reflective of his mystical roots. He wrote on a wide range of topics including: biblical prophecy (*The Prophets*); medieval philosophy and philosophers; Jewish mysticism, rabbinic theology, East European Jewry, prayer, the State of Israel, applied religious ethics, and Hasidism.

### *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man (1951)*

*The Sabbath* was first published in conjunction with the Conservative Movement's Sabbath Revitalization Campaign and remains popular today. It is a deeply expressive and lyrical interpretation of the sabbath as a "monument to time" and a central feature of Jewish religious experience and identity.

# Leader's Guide

## The Sabbath

### Objectives

- Participants will read short, representative passages from Heschel's work, *The Sabbath*.
- Participants will be able to recognize how Heschel uses language (vocabulary, metaphor) as a methodological tool.
- Participants will analyze Heschel's use of rabbinic texts as a methodological tool.
- Participants will engage in a discussion about how Heschel understands the sabbath as a formative Jewish experience.

### To the Leader

This material and lesson plan are significantly different from the other types of study sessions we have developed. Theology, by its nature, is more subjective and encourages open-ended questions and, often, no definitive answers. A series of statements from works by Heschel are followed by discussion questions. You may choose to use these questions or you can formulate your own. The highly impressionistic nature of Heschel's writing encourages creative responses. We will not always supply answers. Since the questions are designed to generate discussion, you might spend 10 minutes on one question, and 30 seconds on another. Do not stifle discussion, and let it go in any direction that seems productive and energetic.

**Leader's Introduction:** *The Sabbath*, by Abraham Joshua Heschel, presents a unique and poetically engaging discussion about the subject. He understands and appreciates the Sabbath in purely theological terms: it is a spiritual experience. Jews celebrate (and rejoice in) the Sabbath for experiential rewards, not merely to fulfill a set of ritual obligations, prescriptions and proscriptions for the day ("you must do this...you may not do this...")

Heschel maintains that Jews throughout the ages have invested time, not space, with sanctity. Historical events, the Sabbath and festivals, rites of passage – all moments sacralized in time – are its Jewish monuments. "*The Sabbath itself*" he writes, "*is a sanctuary which we build, a sanctuary in time.*"

### Dueling Dimensions: Time vs. Space

[This study guide contains a series of quotes. You might want to ask volunteers to read each of the statements. This direction will not be repeated.]

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**Heschel #1** Technical civilization is man's conquest of space. It is a triumph frequently achieved by sacrificing an essential ingredient of existence, namely time. In technical civilization, we expend time to gain space. To enhance our power in the world of space is our main objective. Yet to have more does not mean to be more. The power we attain in the world of space terminates abruptly at the borderline of time. But time is the heart of existence.

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### Questions:

- *How does Heschel characterize space?*
- *How does he characterize time?*
- *How does he view the relationship between space and power? [i.e. What effect do they have on each other?]*
- *What is the relationship between time and space?*

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**Heschel #2** We are all infatuated with the splendor of space, with the grandeur of things and space. Thing is a category that lies heavy on our minds, tyrannizing all our thoughts. Our imagination tends to mold all concepts in its image. In our daily lives we attend primarily to that which the sense are spelling out for us: to what the eyes perceive, to what the fingers touch. Reality to us is *thinghood*, consisting of substances that occupy space, even God is conceived by most of us as a thing.

The result of our *thinginess* is our blindness to all reality that fails to identify itself as a thing, as a matter of fact. This is obvious in our understanding of time, which, being thingless and insubstantial, appears to us as if it had no reality.

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### Questions:

- *Here Heschel focuses even more critically on the concept of space. How would you characterize his understanding of space in this statement?*
- *Notice Heschel's use of language. What words jump out at you as a reflection of his criticism? What images do they invoke?*
  - “infatuated with the splendor of space”
  - “a category that lies heavy on our minds”
  - “tyrannizing all our thoughts”
  - “reality to us is a thinghood”
  - “our thinginess”
  - “our blindness to all reality that fails to identify itself...”
  - “as if it had no reality”
- *Let's focus, more specifically, on Heschel's word: thinginess. What does this word suggest to you?*

**Discussion Question:** *Do you agree with Heschel's critique of our materialism?*

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**Heschel #3** The Bible is more concerned with time than with space. It sees the world in dimension of time. It pays more attention to generations, to events, than to countries, to things; it is more concerned with history than with geography. To understand the teaching of the Bible, one must accept its premise that time has a meaning for life which is at least equal to that of space; that time has a significance and sovereignty of its own.

Pages 6-7

### Questions:

- *How does Heschel understand the Biblical view of time?*
- *Does Heschel seem to contradict himself in the first and last part of this statement?*

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**Heschel #4** Judaism teaches us to be attached to *holiness in time*, to be attached to sacred events, to learn how to consecrate sanctuaries that emerge from the magnificent stream of a year. The Sabbaths are our great cathedrals; and our Holy of Holies is a shrine that neither the Romans nor the Germans were able to burn; a shrine that even apostasy cannot easily obliterate: the Day of Atonement. According to the ancient rabbis, it is not the observance of the Day of Atonement, but the Day itself, the ‘*essence of the Day*,’ which, with man’s repentance, atones for the sins of man.” (*Mishneh Torah, Teshuvah 1,3*) Page 8

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**Questions:**

- *What terminology does Heschel use here to depict Jewish attitudes towards time (and the Sabbath as a dimension of time)?*
  - “holiness in time”
  - “sanctuaries that emerge from the magnificent stream of a year”
  - “the Sabbaths are our great cathedrals”
  - “the Sabbaths are our Holy of Holies”
  - “a shrine that even apostasy cannot easily obliterate”
- *Looking back at the Heschel’s use of language in his critique of space, how does it compare with his understanding of the concept of time in Judaism?*
  - “tyrannizing all our thoughts” vs. “holiness in time”
  - “our blindness to all reality..” vs. “a shrine...”

**Leader:** Heschel writes: “*It is not a thing that lends significance to a moment; it is the moment that lends significance to things.*” How can we analyze this statement? Can you give examples?

Heschel views the human condition as a continual struggle to balance matters of time and space. While Judaism understands the inherent sanctity of time, contemporary Jews have more difficulty living this ideal. In Heschel’s words: “*We cannot conquer time through space. We can only master time in time.*”

**Discussion Question:** *What measures can we take to become our own “masters of time”?*

## The Rabbis According to Heschel: Images of the Sabbath

**Leader:** Heschel employs rabbinic literature freely, interpreting the rabbis through his own unique lens. He suggests that we can understand the theological foundations of the Sabbath through a reading of these texts.

Let's look at some of the metaphors Heschel employs in his presentation about the Sabbath. [Ask volunteers to read the following *midrashim*, cited in *The Sabbath*.]

### Shabbat as a Taste of Eternity

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**Heschel #5** At the time when God was giving the Torah to Israel, He said to them: 'My children! If you accept the Torah and observe my *mitzvot*, I will give you for all eternity a thing most precious that I have in my possession.'

'And what,' asked Israel, 'is the precious thing which Thou wilt give us if we obey Thy Torah?' 'The world to come'.

'Show us in this world an example of the world to come.'

'The Sabbath is an example of the world to come.' (*Kad ha-Qemah, Shabbat, end*)

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#### Question:

- *What is Heschel suggesting about the Sabbath, in citing this midrash?*

#### Answers might include:

The Sabbath is a foretaste of eternity

The Sabbath is God's gift to the Jews for accepting the Torah

#### Question:

- *If celebrating the Sabbath is a foretaste of the world to come, does this imply something different for those who do not celebrate the Sabbath (or observe the covenant)?*

**Discussion Question:** *Do you believe that there is a correlation between good behavior and divine reward?*

### The Sabbath as Bride and Queen

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**Heschel #6** It is incumbent on every man to be very, very zealous in making the Sabbath day preparations, to be prompt and diligent as a man who has heard that the queen is coming to lodge at his house, or that the bride and her entire entourage are coming to his home. What would such a man do? He would rejoice greatly and exclaim: 'What a great honor they do me by their coming to dwell under my roof!' He would say to his servants; 'Arrange the house, clean and tidy it, and prepare the beds in honor of the arrival, and I will go to purchase the bread, meat and fish—whatever I can obtain in their honor.' Such a man will busy himself in the preparation of the Sabbath food, even though he have a thousand servants.

“Now who is greater than the Sabbath which is both bride and queen and who is called delightful. A thousand times more so should the master of the house himself be busy in making the preparations, even though he may have a hundred servants.”

Sefer Hasidim

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### Questions:

- *The Sabbath as a bride or queen is well known metaphor in Judaism. How does this passage from Sefer Hasidim instruct the individual to prepare for the Sabbath?*
  - *How does the individual prepare physically, and how spiritually?*
  - *What words does Heschel use for this?*
    - Zeal require in preparing for the guest
    - Promptness and diligence
    - Rejoice
    - Accept it as a great honor
    - Clean and tidy the house
    - Prepare bed
    - Purchase food
- The honor is so great, the master does the preparation himself

### Question:

- *How does this metaphor reinforce Heschel's feelings about the Sabbath?*

The arrival of the Sabbath should create the same excitement as an extraordinary guest; preparations and expectations are so great that the master should undertake them himself rather than leave it to the servants.

**Leader:** Heschel also cites the words from *Lekha Dodi* from the *Kabbalat Shabbat* service.

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Come, Beloved, meet the Bride!  
Let us go and welcome the shabbat!

Come in peace, crown of God  
Come with joy and cheerfulness,  
Amidst the faithful and precious people  
Come, Beloved, meet the Bride.

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### Questions:

- *Why is the image of the Sabbath as a bride such an evocative one?*
- *What do we conjure up when we think about brides?*
- *How might these images relate to shabbat?*

## The Sabbath as a Groom

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### Heschel #7 Rabbi Shimeon and the Cave

Rabbi Judah ben Ilai, Rabbi Jose, and Rabbi Shimeon ben Yohai were sitting together, and with them was a man called Judah ben Gerim. Rabbi Judah opened the discussion and said: “How fine are the works of this people [the Romans]! They have made roads and market palaces, they have built bridges, they have erected bathhouses.”

Rabbi Jose was silent. Then Rabbi Shimeon ben Yohai replied and said: *“All that they made they made for themselves. They made roads and market places to put harlots there; they built bridges to levy tolls for them; they erected bathhouses to delight their bodies.”*

Judah ben Gerim went home and related to his father and mother all that had been said. And the report of it spread until it reached the government. Decreed the government: *“Judah who exalted us shall be exalted; Jose who was silent shall go into exile; Shimeon who reviled our work shall be put to death.”*

When Rabbi Shimeon heard of the decree, he took his son Rabbi Eleazar with him and hid in the House of Learning. And his wife came every day and brought him stealthily bread and a jug of water. When Rabbi Shimeon heard that men were searching for them and trying to capture them, he said to his son: *“We cannot rely upon a woman’s discretion, for she can easily be talked over. Or perhaps she may be tortured until she discloses our place of concealment. So they went together into the field and hid themselves in a cave, so that no man knew what had become of them. And a miracle happened: a carob tree grew up inside the cave and a well of water opened, so that they had enough to eat and enough to drink. They took off their clothes and sat up to their necks in sand. The whole day they studied Torah. And when the time for prayer came, they put their clothes on and prayed, and then they put them off and again dug themselves into the sand, so that their clothes should not wear away. Thus they spent twelve years in the cave. When the twelve years had come to an end, Elijah the prophet came and, standing at the entrance of the cave exclaimed: “Who will inform the son of Yohai that the emperor is dead and his decree has been annulled?”*

When they heard this, they emerged from the cave. Seeing the people plowing the fields and sowing the seed, they exclaimed: *“These people forsake eternal life and are engaged in temporary life!”* Whatever they looked upon was immediately consumed by the fire of their eyes. Thereupon a voice from heaven exclaimed: *“Have you emerged to destroy My world? Return to your cave!”*

So they returned and dwelled there another twelve months; for they said, the punishment of the wicked in hell lasts only twelve months. When the twelve month had come to an end, the voice was heard from heaven saying: *“Go forth from your cave!”* Thus they went out. Where ever Rabbi Eleazar hurt, Rabbi Shimeon healed. Said Rabbi Shimeon: *“My son, if only we two remain to study the Torah, that will be sufficient for the world.”*

It was the eve of the Sabbath when they left the cave, and as they came out they saw an old man carrying two bundles of myrtle in his hand, a sweet-smelling herb having the perfume of paradise. *“What are they for?”* they asked. *“They are in honor of the Sabbath,”* the old man replied. Said Rabbi Shimeon to his son: *“Behold and see how dear God’s commands are to Israel...”* At that moment they both found tranquility of soul. *Shabbat 33b*



## Questions:

- *What are the various positions held by these rabbis?*  
Rabbi Judah praises Roman civilization – in Heschel’s terms, its mastery of space with the creation of useful and important inventions.  
Rabbi Jose is silent.  
Rabbi Shimeon ben Yohai views their innovations as selfishly motivated, leading to corruption and sin.
- *What is implied by the Roman response to Rabbi Judah, and then his subsequent elevation in status?*
- *What is the Roman response to Rabbi Shimeon ben Yohai? What is God’s response to him (and his son)?*  
The Romans sentence him to death.  
God protects him in hiding.  
God rewards Rabbi Shimeon, first by sending him the carob tree and well, and later by sending Elijah.
- *What are Rabbi Shimeon’s two expressions of piety?*  
The renunciation of Roman civilization (“thinginess”)  
Love and devotion to Torah
- *What was the cause of Shimeon’s rage when he left the cave? How did God respond to him this time?*  
Rabbi Shimeon still felt contempt for the physical world. There was no compromising eternity for temporal life.  
God loves the world he created and is angry that Rabbi Shimeon disdains it.  
It is important to love Torah, but people need to live in God’s world as well.
- *What finally changed their minds?*

**Leader:** [Ask for interpretations of this story. Give people a chance to figure out the connection between the old man carrying myrtle and Shimeon’s finding tranquility of the soul.]

**Heschel’s Interpretation:** In ancient times, myrtle was the symbol for love and the plant for brides. When going out to invite people to weddings, the groom would sometimes carry myrtle, and sometimes wear a garland of myrtle or roses. Additionally, early forms of huppahs were made with myrtle intertwined. It was customary to dance with myrtle before the bride.

The old man running with myrtle personified Israel going to meet the Sabbath bride.

To Rabbi Shimeon, there was something more worthy than civilization – a commitment to the Sabbath was the destiny that would save the Jewish people. The answer to civilization is not to flee from it, but to see it as an aspect of eternity.

**Question:** *What do you think about the usefulness of Heschel’s metaphors of a taste of eternity, a bride/queen, or groom? Which do you find most compelling?*

**Discussion Question:** *What lesson/moral might we take from this story?*

## Ritual Observance

**Leader:** Heschel's traditional roots certainly establish his loyalty to Sabbath ritual observance. But his focus on the theological aspects of the Sabbath suggests a subordination of ritual to spiritual expression. Let's read the following statement he makes about this subject:

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**Heschel #8** The glorification of the day, the insistence upon strict observance, did not, however, lead the rabbis to a deification of the law. 'The Sabbath is given unto you, not you unto the Sabbath.' (*Mekhilta 31:13*) The ancient rabbis knew that excessive piety may endanger the fulfillment of the essence of the law. (*Genesis Rabbah, 19:3*) 'There is nothing more important, according to the Torah, than to preserve human life...Even when there is the slightest possibility that a life may be at stake one may disregard every prohibition of the law.' One must sacrifice mitzvot *for the sake of man* rather than sacrifice man 'for the sake of mitzvot.' The purpose of the Torah is 'to bring life to Israel, in this world and in the world to come.' *Otzar ha-Geonim, Yoma: 30*

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### Questions:

- *What is Heschel's intention in citing the rabbinic pronouncement from the Mekhilta: 'The Sabbath is given to you...'??*
- *What does Heschel imply in his term "deification of the law"? How does it contribute to his overall feelings about the Sabbath?*
- *From what we have discussed so far about Heschel, does this position fit?*

**Leader:** Heschel's personal deference to spiritual over ritual matters is reflected in the following story (that might be apocryphal; but it doesn't matter.)

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One day, a group of JTS faculty members were gathering for *minhah* services. They were discussing whom they could call to be the tenth – one faculty member said: "Heschel's in his office. Let's call him," to which another (reputedly Lieberman) replied: "Heschel is interested in prayer, not *minhah*." [told by Harvey Goldberg in "Becoming History: Perspectives on the Seminary Faculty at Mid-Century" in Wertheimer, *Tradition Renewed: A History of the Jewish Theological Seminary of American*]

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**Leader:** In Heschel's worldview, the Sabbath is a day on which we renew the spirit by living in sanctified time. "It is a day of harmony and peace. The Sabbath is a profound conscious harmony of man and the world, a sympathy for all things and a participation in the spirit that unites what is below and what is above."

### Question:

- *Is Heschel still relevant in our modern world?*

**Discussion Question:** *What activities might we engage in on the Sabbath, other than our usual prescribed activities, that would be consistent with Heschel's theology?*