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Abraham Joshua Heschel might seem to be the last person imaginable whose best known theological works (among many major works), *Man is Not Alone* (1951) and *God in Search of Man* (1955), would stress the sublime and wonder, with joy as a major expression of both. Indeed, the word "joy" appears 14 times in Heschel's *Man is Not Alone* (1951) and 36 times in *God in Search of Man* (1955), that is, if AMAZON.COM website word searches are to be believed—a fascinating research tool if accurate (but Google only counts 26 uses of "joy" in *God in Search of Man*, so caution is in order).

Heschel endured enormous tragedy. A brilliant student in a family of rabbis who had already achieved distinction even in his 20s, a Ph.D. at the University of Berlin with a dissertation on the prophets followed by more distinguished study with more distinguished figures. Then all was shattered. The Gestapo arrested him in 1938, and he was deported to Poland. Before the next decade ended, Nazi bombs killed one sister, Nazis murdered his mother, and Nazis killed two more sisters in concentration camps. Heschel himself escaped to London only weeks before the German invasion of Poland through the intervention of Julian Morgenstern, who was President of Hebrew Union College in
Cincinnati, the principal seminary for Reform Judaism. Heschel visited several European countries after WWII but never Germany, Austria, or Poland, where so many family deaths took place.¹

Moving to the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) in New York City in 1946, a more congenial theological and spiritual home for Heschel, he emerged as one of the most significant theologians of twentieth-century Judaism, indeed, one of the most significant and certainly best known theologians in the United States. He became close friends with Reinhold Niebuhr at Union Theological Seminary, kiddy corner across Broadway from JTS, became famously involved in civil rights—his photograph marching with Martin Luther King remains one of the iconic images of the civil rights crusade—had close Catholic friends from Thomas Merton to the Berrigan brothers, worked with Catholics, Protestants, and Jews in Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam and the National Council of Christians and Jews, helped organize efforts to rescue Jews in the Soviet Union, and gave the eulogy at Niebuhr's funeral in 1971. When he died a year later, he left an irreplaceable legacy of learning, scholarship, activism, and empathy that might have seemed impossible for someone who endured unspeakable losses.

Is there a link between the cause of those losses and Heschel's theology? This is not the place for biographical speculation, much less amateur psychoanalysis, and the search
for motivation can encounter so many briar patches that little fruit can be reached. This said, it is not unhelpful to discuss Heschel as a theologian who asked, "what happened?" How could God's creatures go so unbelievably wrong to deny the divine and the worth of God's creations? Heschel begins not with Biblical texts or assertions about the sovereignty of God but with inquiries about the capabilities of the humanity God has created, no matter their limits and imperfections.

In *Man is Not Alone* Heschel observes that "three aspects of nature . . . command man's attention: power, loveliness, grandeur. Power he exploits, loveliness he enjoys, grandeur fills him with awe." Heschel moves rapidly away from a discussion of power to hone in on "the sense of the ineffable." He quickly raises "the sense of the sublime," then invokes the centrality of wonder in comprehending possibilities of humanity and the divinity of the divine. "Wonder rather than doubt is the root of knowledge," he argues. Doubt indeed "challenges the minds accounts about reality" and demands "examination and verification." But "wonder goes beyond knowledge. . . . Doubt may come to an end, wonder lasts forever." Wonder uplifts amazement, and it is in amazement, what Heschel terms "radical amazement," that we begin to see "all of reality" that prompts the breadth of thought that gives rise to human inquiry.
Heschel's critique of religion, or what was passing for religion as he wrote, is severe because Heschel goes right at religion's defense of itself. "It is customary to blame secular science and anti-religious philosophy for the eclipse of religion in modern society," Heschel writes. But Heschel argues, "it would be more honest to blame religion for its own defeats." Religion had become "irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid." Too much faith had been drowned by "creed, worship by discipline, love by habit." Heschel does not indict theology specifically. But one wonders if Heschel's biting string—"irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid"—has not also specifically belonged to at least nineteenth- and twentieth-century theology, Jewish and Christian alike.³

In *Man is Not Alone*, Heschel begins probing the meaning of the divine, not with the commands of scripture or developing formal structures to demonstrate God's sovereignty, but with a concept that incorporates the tools humans possess to understand what they are and what they can be and what the divine beyond them might be. The efforts came out of Heschel's fascination for and commitment to the Jewish mystical tradition. Heschel's focus was the "ineffable," that which seems beyond words and can scarcely be expressed yet which men and women can glimpse and can begin to appreciate in transforming ways. As Heschel observes, "the intrinsic, the most essential, is never
expressed." It is what "lies within our reach but not within our grasp. . . . the true meaning, source and end of being, in other words, the ineffable." Rather than being inconsequentially slight or fleeting, ineffability's glimpse at the whole of reality and the dignity of humanity as God's creatio, opens critical sequences that lead to the sublime, to awe, and to joy.⁴

Emphasizing the sublime may seem a peculiar way of asserting the primacy of God in a failed world but is critical to Heschel's task. He derives his emphasis from one of the simplest commands of the Hebrew Bible, from Isaiah, "Lift up your eyes and see." It is Heschel's answer—God's answer—to the problem of discovering "an awareness of God through beholding the world." Interestingly, if Heschel quotes Isaiah, he uses the injunction to move out to life far beyond the Bible in text but not experience. Discovering an "awareness of God" is not here found in an assemblage of Biblical texts but in confronting the world. We may "see" narrowly, provincially, egotistically. But if we can move away from our selves and toward the world, we will see will see many things, three especially: "its power, its beauty, and its grandeur." [italics Heschel, here and elsewhere] If modern men and women "learn to use," in the times of the prophets Hebrews "learned in order to revere," and doing
so at least momentarily enabled them to appreciate the sublime and "how to sense wonder and awe." 

"The sublime is that which we see and are unable to convey." But it is not mute. It is an experience. It opens seekers to "things of beauty as well as . . . acts of goodness and . . . the search for truth." It opens directly out to life and to the beauty that inheres in nature and the dignity implicit in humanity. This beauty and dignity are crucial to Heschel because they both confirm and demonstrate critical parts of the divine. Heschel hardly obscures failure, disappointment, and evil. He powerfully describes evil as "divergence, confusion, that which alienates man from man, man from God." Interestingly, Heschel also insists that good precedes evil because it is whole, while evil is fragmented, taking root in humanity's limitations, imperfections, scatteredness: "Evil is division, contest, lack of unity[;] as the unity of all being is prior to the plurality of things, so is the good prior to evil." 

It is the sublime that, in turn, opens out to the capacity for awe, wonder, and joy. Awe is a critical, precious gift, the "intuition for the creaturely dignity of all things and their preciousness to God," a gift reified by the effort to approach the sublime, not through calculation. Awe, in turn, is "more than an emotion; it is a way of understanding," a way of coming to grips with God. One might think, Heschel avers, that awe
emerges at the end of grappling with God. It is quite the reverse. As Heschel quotes the Psalms, "the awe of God is the beginning of wisdom," it is "a way to wisdom."  

Wonder stems from what cannot be uttered and a sense of the sublime. It requires a realization that is hard for modern men and women because it runs so opposite to the modern impulse toward control and the conviction that "everything can be explained." Wonder is the "radical amazement" that comes before explanation. Wonder acknowledges the sheer bounty and intricacy of "history and nature," history made by fallible yet not hopeless humanity, nature made by God, but which modern humanity seeks to manipulate and control. Wonder requires stepping back, taking a breath. It pairs with awe. It requires a capacity to envision the impossible, or at least the seemingly impossible, and it inspires a respect for that which is beyond us, yet that exists and not only exists but seems almost overwhelming and beyond explanation. In this regard, wonder also requires humility, a capacity to know that some things, many things, most things are beyond us, certainly as individuals and especially as societies and cultures. Yet in almost contradictory fashion, Heschel insists that wonder also is the root of philosophy, a view in which Heschel explicitly follows Plato and Aristotle. As Heschel quotes Aristotle, "For it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize."
Yet "as civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines," and much of this decline in Heschel's view can be laid at the doorstep of the knowledge and rationalization that begin in philosophy and continue through to all fields. The problem, surely confirmed by the twentieth-century itself, is that "mankind will not perish from want of information[,] but only for want of appreciation." It is here that Heschel makes his claim for faith. "The way to faith leads through acts of wonder and radical amazement," not through knowledge, calculation, and mere information, and Heschel cites the commands to that most miserable of Biblical figures, Job, to demonstrate the point:

Hearken unto this, O Job,
Stand still and consider the wondrous works of the Lord
Do you know how God lays His command upon them,
And causes the lightning of His cloud to shine?"

Joy is the radical consequence of faith, the ineffable, the sublime, awe, wonder. Joy is their imperative, their command. Joy is not "self-centered" because it transcends mere pleasure. Joy bears a selflessness, a surrender of the individual to wonder, awe, and the ineffable. It is an "active disinterestedness," and it "rest[s] freely . . . in something of intrinsic value and promise." As Heschel summarized, "to have joy in what is beautiful is to trust to the inspiration of
beauty and not to the contrivance of artifice." Joy runs beyond the object toward the intrinsic and, therefore, toward the divine and toward God. "Joy is a way to God." Joy is the free gift of God, the expansive expression of the meaning of the sublime, of wonder, of awe.  

Was Heschel trying to answer the question, "what happened?" What might account not only for bad things but also for unspeakable things on a scale almost beyond imagination? The events that so disfigured modern Germany have had many explanations. The Nazis distorted German law. The Nazis twisted a long history of German politics. The Nazis made a mockery of Christianity. The Nazis were criminals. The Nazis made a mockery of human learning.

If one were to realize the implications of Heschel's argument, perhaps the answer to the question "what happened?" rests in something very simple—that a morally blinded people lost the capacity to contemplate the ineffable, the sublime, wonder, awe, and joy, nor could they afford those contemplations. A people capable of wonder, no matter how limited and constrained by human frailty, might be more cautious about politics, their prejudices, their hatreds. They might ask, is not this person also God's creature, no matter how imperfect?

Amidst the swirl of knowledge, the capacity for power had only risen, while the capacity to contemplate loveliness and
grandeur vanished. Questions could not be asked. Contemplations could not be pursued. The sublime, wonder, awe, joy—the ineffable—had been smothered in darkness, and darkness would "cover the earth, and gross darkness the people" and the Lord would not rise upon them, his glory would not be seen upon them, and the imperative of joy would vanish in the cacophony of human arrogance.


4 Heschel, Man is Not Alone, 5.

5 Ibid., 38; Heschel, God in Search of Man, 33-40.

6 Heschel, Man is Not Alone, 120.

7 Heschel, God in Search of Man, 74.

8 Ibid., 45.

9 Ibid., 47.

10 Ibid., 384-386.