

*Awe, Anger and
Action:*

*Abraham Joshua Heschel
and Jewish Prayer*

Study Session

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KOACH
on campus



The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism

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The following materials have been created by **KOACH** for the enhancement of your on-campus programming. They are designed to be adjustable based on your interests and the available time. This packet contains: background materials and a facilitator guide. The background materials and facilitator guide will help you build conversations around the text and create connections between the text and contemporary life.

Questions? Send them to: Weinstein@uscj.org

Awe, Anger and Action

Facilitator Guide

Overview and Objective

Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972) was a decisive figure in 20th century Conservative and American Judaism. Born in Lithuania, Heschel emigrated to the United States in 1940 and served as Professor of Jewish Ethics and Mysticism at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America from 1946-1972. As a scholar and theologian, Heschel inspired people to rethink and deepen their relationships with God and Jewish practice. Heschel was also a passionate activist, involved with the Civil Rights Movement, anti-war protests, and the struggle for Soviet Jewry. When commenting on walking alongside Martin Luther King Jr. in the march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965, Heschel wrote, "I felt as though my legs were praying."

This study packet offers you an opportunity to explore Heschel's thoughts on prayer and activism. The packet is comprised of three sections. The first two sections are made up of texts and questions based on those texts. The first section explores a passage from an essay Heschel wrote called "On Prayer" for the periodical *Conservative Judaism* in 1970. The second section will guide you in applying Heschel's thoughts and theories to Jewish prayer. In the third section, you will be challenged to use the material from this study packet to create your own social action project.

Although this material is presented as a progression, you need not follow the format from beginning to end. Be creative with the material and have fun!

Definitions and Biographies

Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan - 1881-1983. Born in Lithuania, he moved to the United States in 1889 and taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America from 1909-1963. Kaplan worked to integrate Jewish theology with modern developments in the social sciences. He eschewed the traditional concept of chosenness, viewed Judaism as an evolving civilization and considered Jewish law to be "folkways" that could be discarded once they were no longer meaningful. Although Kaplan remained a committed member of the Conservative Movement, his ideas became the backbone of Reconstructionism.

Section One– Reverence or Rage

Texts:

Pray to be Shocked

The predicament of prayer is twofold: Not only do we not know how to pray; we do not know what to pray for.

We have lost the ability to be shocked...

Should we not pray for the ability to be shocked at atrocities committed by man, for the capacity to be dismayed at our inability to be dismayed?...

...Prayer must never be a citadel for selfish concerns, but rather a place for deepening concern over other people's plight...

Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and to ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, falsehoods. The liturgical movement must become a revolutionary movement, seeking to overthrow the forces that continue to destroy the promise, the hope, the vision...

Dark is the world to me, for all its cities and stars. If not for my faith that God in His silence still listens to a cry, who could stand such agony?

"On Prayer" by Abraham Joshua Heschel from "Conservative Judaism," Vol. XXV, No. 1, Fall 1970

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you find prayer to be an emotional experience? Are you filled with joy and gratitude? Do you feel somber or full of reverence? Do your feelings change depending on where you pray (for example, whether you pray in a synagogue or a Hillel)? Does the holiday or type of service (*Kabbalat Shabbat* vs. *Kol Nidre*) affect your emotions?
2. Have students read the passage from Abraham Joshua Heschel a few times. Encourage them to break into *hevrotot* (study pairs). When they have finished reading the selection, ask students to describe Heschel's outlook on prayer. Abraham Joshua Heschel suggests that we should use prayer to be shocked and outraged rather than awed and overjoyed. Ask students if they agree. Have they ever experienced shock or outrage when praying? If so, ask them to share their experiences and feelings at the time.

Section Two– From Outrage to Action

Texts:

תהלים פרק לו כה

כה נער הייתי גם זקנתי ולא ראיתי צדיק נעזב וזרעו מבקש לחם:

I was a young boy and I was also an old man, and I have never seen a righteous person go hungry or his offspring beg for bread.

Psalms 37:25

ברכות השחר

ברוך אתה יהוה אלהינו מלך העולם, מלביש ערמים:

Blessed are you God, King of the Universe, who clothes the naked.

From Birkhot H'Shahar, The Morning Blessings

בראשית פרק ג כא

כא ויעש יהוה אלהים לאדם ולאשתו כתנות עור וילבשם:

And God made for Adam and his wife garments of skin and He clothed them.

Genesis 3:21

In the following verse, Isaiah chastises the people for following the ritual obligations of fasting while ignoring their moral obligations.

ישעיה פרק נח ז

ו הלא זה צום אבחרהו פתח חרצבות רשע התר אגדות מוטה ושלח רצוצים חפשים וכל-מוטה תנתקו: ז הלא פרס לרעב לחמך ועניים מרודים תביא בית כיתר אה ערם וכסיתו ומבשרך לא תתעלם.

6. No, this is the fast I desire. To unlock fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of “the yoke [lawlessness],” to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke. 7. It is to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home; **when you see the naked, to clothe him,** and not to ignore your own kin.

Isaiah 58:6-7, Jewish Publication Society translation

Discussion Questions:

1. Read the texts in the box. The quote from Psalms 35:27 is traditionally said at the end of the *Birkat HaMazon* (Blessing After a Meal). The second text is part of the *Birkot HaShahar*, the Morning Blessings. Do these texts describe or reflect your everyday observations? How are your experiences similar or different to the descriptions?
2. Refer back to "Pray to be Shocked" by Abraham Joshua Heschel from Section One of this study packet. How do you believe that Heschel would want Jews to relate to the excerpts from *Birkat HaMazon* and *Birkot HaShahar*?

For example, in "Pray to be Shocked," Heschel states, "Prayer must never be a citadel for selfish concerns, but rather a place for deepening concern over other people's plight." How do the passages from *Birkat HaMazon* and *Birkot HaShahar* help us deepen our concern for the plight of others?

3. Have you ever been with a community which did not say the quoted line from the *Birkat HaMazon*? If so, what was your reaction to this omission?

At the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan used to comment on this passage in the *Birkat HaMazon* and say to his students, "If you don't mean it, don't say it."¹ Do you agree with Kaplan's approach? What are some arguments for including this line from the *Birkat HaMazon* (for example, you could argue that we should say this line as an expression of hope)? What are some arguments for excluding it?

4. Read Genesis 3:21 and Isaiah 58:6-7. How do these passages help you understand excerpt from *Birkat HaShahar* that praises God for clothing the naked?

¹ As recalled by former student, Rabbi Elliot Dorff, Professor and Rector at the University of Judaism.

Section Three– Pray With Your Legs

Create a social action project based on one or more of the texts in this study packet. For example, if you found the passage from Isaiah moving, get a group of students together and set up a clothing drive in your school's student center. Or, if you felt stirred to action after reading the excerpt from the *Birkat HaMazon*, organize a student trip to volunteer at a soup kitchen. Before embarking on the social action activity, hand out copies of the related text. Ask participants how the text inspires them to take action in the world. Review the text again after the activity is over. See if anyone has any new insights on the text after engaging in social action.

Additional Resources

- God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism by Abraham Joshua Heschel. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976.
- The Jewish Prophet: Visionary Words from Moses and Miriam to Henrietta Szold and A.J. Heschel by Rabbi Dr. Michael J. Shere (editor). Jewish Lights Publishing, 2002.
- Man's Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism by Abraham Joshua Heschel. Aurora Press, 1998.
- Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity : Essays by Abraham Joshua Heschel, Susannah Heschel (editor). Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997.
- To Do the Right and the Good: A Jewish Approach to Modern Social Ethics by Elliot N. Dorff. Jewish Publication Society, 2002.