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*Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us . . . fix our eyes on Jesus, . . . who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. — Hebrews 12:1, 2, NIV.*

## ***Who Is Man?***

### **Digest**

Abraham J. Heschel, *Who Is Man?* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1965).<sup>1</sup>

*Editorial Note:* “Abraham Joshua Heschel was born in Warsaw in 1907. He was a descendant of numerous Hasidic dynasties. He spent his formative years learning at a traditional Heder and Yeshiva, like all Eastern European Jews with his religious background. At age twenty, he entered a new world of thought. He enrolled at the University of Berlin to obtain his doctorate. He also studied at the Hochschule fuer die Wissenschaft des Judentums, Berlin’s liberal rabbinical seminary, where he later taught Talmud. In 1937, Martin Buber, the famed Jewish philosopher, named him his successor at the Lehrhaus in Frankfort. This was the city’s central agency for adult Jewish learning. The following year, the Nazis deported Heschel and all Jews of Polish citizenship back to Poland. Fortunately, six weeks before the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939, Heschel was able to leave Poland for London. There he established the Institute of Jewish Learning. The following year, he came to Cincinnati. Heschel’s life was a combination of paradoxes. First, he was a scholar in the Western tradition. He wrote scores of scientifically sound works on the classics of Judaism. . . . On the other hand, he also penned numerous volumes of a non-academic nature on the spiritual crises and questions which the modern Jew confronts. . . . Then, too, in his personal ritual practice, Heschel was almost Orthodox. Yet, at the same time, he was deeply committed to strengthening ties with peoples of other faiths. In 1964, Heschel met with Pope Paul VI. As a result, Heschel influenced the Second Vatican Council to issue strong statements in support of Jews and Judaism. The following year, Heschel became the first Jew ever to be appointed to the faculty of the Union Theological Seminary in New York. . . . [That same year,] Heschel went to Selma, Alabama, to march with Martin Luther King in the struggle for civil rights. Someone who marched with him questioned why this eminent scholar came to Selma instead of remaining in his ivory tower in New York. Heschel’s reply was profound: ‘When I march in Selma, my feet are praying.’”<sup>2</sup>

The following digest is drawn from Abraham J. Heschel’s (1907-1972) Raymond Fred West Memorial Lectures at Stanford University, 1963.<sup>3</sup>

## Definitions of Man

“Postmodern man is more deeply perplexed about the nature of man than were his ancestors. . . . Man is a peculiar being trying to understand his uniqueness. What he seeks to understand is not his animality but his humanity. He is not in search of his origin; he is in search of his destiny. . . . Specifically, our theme is not only: What is a *human being*? But also: What is *being human*?

“The being of a person is never completed, final. The status of a person is a *status nascendi*. The choice is made moment by moment. There is no standing still. . . . Being human is not a thing, a substance; it is a moment that happens; not a process but a sequence of acts or events. . . . Man lives in an order of events, not only in an order of processes. It is a spiritual order . . . Being human is not a solid structure or a string of predictable facts, but an incalculable series of moments and acts. . . .

“The truth . . . is that man is never alone. . . . Man in his being is derived from, attended by, and directed to the being of community. For man *to be* means *to be with* other human beings. His existence is co-existence. He can never attain fulfillment, or sense meaning, unless it is shared, unless it pertains to other human beings. . . .

“Man achieves fullness of being in fellowship, in care for others. He expands his existence by ‘bearing his fellow-man’s burden.’ As we have said, animals are concerned for their own needs; the degree of our being human stands in direct proportion to the degree in which we care for others. . . . Our first theme, then, is not what man is but how he is, not human being but being human, which is the sum of many relationships in which a human being is involved.

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## Man and Meaning

“Human being is either coming into meaning or betraying it. The concern for meaning, the gist of all creative efforts, is not self-imposed; it is a necessity of his being. . . . It is the meaning of man that illumines the being of man, and it is the being of man that both evokes and verifies the meaning of man. . . . It is not enough for me to be able to say ‘I am’; I want to know *who I am*, and in relation to whom I live. . . .

“It is a most significant fact that man is not sufficient to himself, that life is not meaningful to him unless it is serving an end beyond itself, unless it is of value to someone else. . . .

“Human existence cannot derive its ultimate meaning from society, because society itself is in need of meaning. . . . We do not think that a human being is valuable because he is a member of the race; it is rather the opposite: the human race is valuable because it is composed of human beings.

“Only a free person knows that the true meaning of existence is experienced in giving, in endowing, in meeting a person face to face, in fulfilling higher needs. . . . Man cannot prove transcendent meaning; he is a manifestation of transcendent meaning. . . . [W]hereas ontology asks about *being as being*, theology asks about *being as creation*,

about being as a divine act. From the perspective of *continuous creation*, there is no being as being; there is only *continuous coming-into-being*. Being is both action and event.

“Humanity is more than an intellectual structure; it is a personal reality. The cry for meaning is a cry for ultimate relationship, for ultimate belonging. It is a cry in which all pretensions are abandoned. Are we alone in the wilderness of time, alone in the dreadfully marvelous universe, of which we are a part and where we feel forever like strangers? Is there a Presence to live by? A Presence worth living for, worth dying for? Is there a way of living in the Presence? Is there a way of living compatible with the Presence?”

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## Meaning in Quest of Man

“The Greeks formulated the search of meaning as man in search of a thought; the Hebrews formulated the search of meaning as God’s thought (or concern) in search of man. . . . God is in search of man, and life is something that requires an answer. History is above all a question, a fathoming, a probing, a testing.

“The primary topic, then, of biblical thinking is not man’s knowledge of God, but rather man’s being known by God, man’s being an object of divine knowledge and concern. . . . God takes man seriously. He enters a direct relationship with man, namely, *a covenant*, to which not only man but also God is committed. In his ultimate confrontation and crises the biblical man knows not only God’s eternal mercy and justice but also God’s *commitment to man*. Upon this sublime

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fact rests the meaning of history and the glory of human destiny.<sup>4</sup>

“Essential to biblical religion is the *awareness of God’s interest in man*, the awareness of a covenant, of a responsibility that lies on Him as well as on us. . . . Life is a *partnership* of God and man; God is not detached from or indifferent to our joys and griefs. Authentic vital needs of man’s body and soul are a divine concern. This is why human life is holy. God is a partner and a partisan in man’s struggle for justice, peace, love, and beauty, and it is because of His being in need of man that He entered a covenant with him for all time, a mutual bond embracing God and man, a relationship to which God, not alone man, is committed. . . .

## Transcendent Meaning

“The relationship of a human being to ultimate meaning can never be conceived as possession. . . . Antecedent man, truth is a prefiguration of transcendence. . . . Denial of transcendence which claims to unveil the truth of being is an inner contradiction, since the truth of being is not within being or within our consciousness of being but rather a truth that transcends our being. . . .

“Our perplexity will not be solved by relating human existence to a timeless, subpersonal abstraction which we call essence. We can do justice to human being only by relating it to the transcendent care for being. . . . Being is surpassed by concern for being. Being would cease to be were it not for God’s care for Being. . . .

“ . . . [T]he primacy of creation over being means that the ‘ought’ precedes the ‘is.’ The order of things goes back to an ‘order’ of God. . . . The loss of the sense of significant being is due to the loss of the commandment of being. Being is obedience, a response. ‘Thou art’ precedes ‘I am.’ I am because I am called upon to be. . . . Do I exist as a human being? My answer is: *I am commanded — therefore I am.* . . . <sup>5</sup>

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“It is an accepted fact that the Bible has given the world a new concept of God. What is not realized is the fact that the Bible has given the world a new vision of man. . . . From the perspective of the Bible . . . God’s dream is not to be alone, [but] to have mankind as a partner in the drama of continuous creation. By whatever we do, by every act we carry out, we either advance or obstruct the drama of redemption.”<sup>6</sup>

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## Endnotes

1. Abraham J. Heschel, *Who Is Man?* is available from Barnes & Noble at [www.barnesandnoble.com/w/who-is-man-heschel/1014691198](http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/who-is-man-heschel/1014691198).
2. Rabbi Samuel M. Stahl, “The Legacy of Abraham Joshua Heschel” (sermon given March 6, 1998), at [tdchar.tripod.com/id60.htm](http://tdchar.tripod.com/id60.htm).
3. Abraham J. Heschel, *Who Is Man?* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1965). Copyright 1965 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford University. Quotations are from pp. 19-22, 29, 41-45, 47, 51-53, 57, 59-61, 65, 71, 73-75, 79, 86, 91, 92, 97, 98, 111, 119.
4. “Judaism, as Conservative Jewish Rabbi Abraham Heschel eloquently pointed out . . . is a religion based on the sanctification of time.” — David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary: A Companion Volume to the Jewish New Testament* (Jerusalem: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1992), p. 557.
5. In Jewish understanding a covenantal “command” or “commandment” is a reciprocal imperative. It applies equally to God and to mankind. The reciprocal imperative, therefore, is a *promise*. What mankind does not or cannot fulfill under the covenant, God himself can and will fulfill.
6. Heschel, loc. cit.

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