



*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.*

## ***Man Is Not Alone***

### **Digest**

Abraham J. Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979).<sup>1</sup>

*Editorial Note:* The following digest is drawn from Abraham Joshua Heschel's treatise, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion*, and particularly from chapter 23, entitled "A Definition of Jewish Religion."<sup>2</sup>

### **God Is in Need of Man**

" . . . [R]eligion — its human side — begins with a sense of obligation, 'with the awareness that something is asked of us,' with the consciousness of an ultimate commitment. It is furthermore an awareness of 'God who sues for our devotion, constantly, persistently, who goes out to meet us as soon as we long to know Him.' Accordingly, religious consciousness is to be characterized by two features — it must be a consciousness of an *ultimate commitment*, and it must be a consciousness of *ultimate reciprocity*. . . .

" . . . [R]eligion . . . 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. Our task is to concur with His interest, to carry out His vision of our task. God is in need of man for the attainment of His ends, and religion, as

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Jewish tradition understands it, is a way of serving these ends, of which we are in need, even though we may not be aware of them, ends which we must learn to feel the need of.

“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. . . . God is a partner and a partisan in man’s struggle for justice, peace, and holiness, 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 only man, is committed. . . .

“Some people think that religion comes about as a perception of an answer to a prayer, while in truth it comes about in our knowing that God shares our prayer. The essence of Judaism is the awareness of the *reciprocity* of God and man, of man’s *togetherness* with Him who abides in eternal otherness. For the task of living is His and ours, and so is the responsibility. We have rights, not only obligations; our ultimate commitment is our ultimate privilege. . . .

“God is now in need of man, because He freely made him a partner in His enterprise, ‘a partner in the work of creation.’ ‘From the first day of creation the Holy One, blessed be He, longed to enter into *partnership* with the terrestrial world’ to dwell *with* His creatures within the terrestrial world. . . .

## The Divine Pathos

“The God of the philosophers is all indifference, too sublime to possess a heart or to cast a glance at our world. His wisdom consists in being conscious of Himself and oblivious to the world. In contrast, the God of the prophets is all concern, too merciful to remain aloof to His creation. He not only rules the world in the majesty of His might; He is personally concerned and even stirred by the conduct and fate of man. ‘His mercy is upon all His works’ (Psalms 145:9). . . .

“God does not judge the deeds of man impassively, in a spirit of cool detachment. His judgment is imbued with a feeling of intimate concern. He is the father of all men, not only a judge; He is a lover engaged to His people, not only a king. God stands in a passionate relationship to man. His love or anger, His mercy or disappointment, is an expression of His profound participation in the history of Israel and all men.

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“Prophecy, then, consists in the proclamation of the divine *pathos*, expressed in the language of the prophets as love, mercy, or anger. Behind the various manifestations of His pathos is one motive, one need: The divine need for human righteousness. . . .

“The Bible is not a history of the Jewish people, but the story of God’s quest of the righteous man. Because of the failure of the human species as a whole to follow in the path of righteousness, it is an individual . . . on which the task is bestowed to satisfy that quest by making every man a righteous man. . . .

## “What Does God Desire?”

“For thousands of years the deity and darkness were thought to be the same: a being, self-attached and full of blind desires; a being whom man revered but did not trust; that would reveal itself to the mad but not to the meek. For thousands of years it was accepted as a fact that the ultimate deity was hostile to man and could only be appeased by offerings of blood, until the prophets came who could not bear any more to see the defeat of God at the hands of fear, and proclaimed that darkness was His abode, not His essence; that as bright as midday’s sun was His voice giving an answer to the question: What does God desire?

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“Is it music?

‘Take away from me the noise of your songs,  
And to the melody of your lyres I will not listen.’ (Amos 5:23)

“Is it prayer?

‘When you spread out your hands,  
I will hide my eyes from you;  
Though you make many a prayer,  
I will not listen,  
Your hands are full of bloodshed.’ (Isaiah 1:15-16)

“Is it sacrifice?

‘Does the Lord delight in burnt-offerings and sacrifices as much as in obedience to the voice of the Lord?’ (I Samuel 15:22)

“And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you but to stand in awe of the Lord your God, walk in His ways, love Him, serve the Lord your God with all your mind and heart, and keep the commands of the Lord and His statutes that I am commanding you today, for your good?” (Deuteronomy 10:12)

## The Religious Need

“There is . . . in every human being an unquenchable need for the lasting, an urge to worship and to revere. Divergence begins in the object and manner of worship. Yet that unquenchable need is often miscarried into self-aggrandizement or a desire to find a guarantee for personal immortality. Judaism shows it to be a need *to be needed by God*. It teaches us that every man is in need of God because God is in need of man. Our need of Him is but an echo of His need of us.

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“There is, of course, the constant danger of believing what we wish rather than wishing what we believe, of cherishing our need as God rather than adopting God as our need. This is why we must always appraise our needs in the light of divine ends.

## The Unknown Ends

“We do not have to rise above ourselves in order to dream of being strong, brave, rich, of being rulers of an empire or ‘a kingdom of soldiers.’ But we have to be inspired in order to dream God’s dream: ‘Thou shalt be holy, for I thy God am holy.’ . . . ‘Thou shalt be unto Me a kingdom of priests, a holy people.’

“It is God who teaches us our ultimate ends. Abraham may not have felt the need for abandoning home and country, nor were the people of Israel eager to give up the flesh-pots of Egypt for the prospect of going into the wilderness.

“Analyzing man’s potentialities, it becomes evident that his uniqueness and essential meaning lie in his ability to satisfy ends that go beyond his ego, while his natural concern is: What may others do for my ego? Religion teaches him to ponder about what he may do for others and to realize that no man’s ego is worthy of being the ultimate end. . . .

## The Conversion of Ends into Needs

“Religions may be classified as those of self-satisfaction, of self-annihilation, or of fellowship. In the first, worship is a quest for satisfaction of personal needs like salvation or desire for immortality. In the second, all personal needs are discarded, and man seeks to dedicate his life to God at the price of annihilating all desire, believing that human sacrifice or at least complete self-denial is the only true form of worship. The third form of religion, while shunning the idea of

considering God a means for attaining personal ends, insists that there is a partnership of God and man, that human needs are God’s concern and that divine ends ought to become human needs. It rejects the idea that the good should be done in self-detachment, that the satisfaction felt in doing the good would taint the purity of the act. Judaism demands the full participation of the person in the service of the Lord; the heart, rather than boycotting the acts of the will, ought to respond in joy and undivided delight.”<sup>3</sup>

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*“The third form of religion [fellowship] . . . insists that there is a partnership of God and man, that human needs are God’s concern and that divine ends ought to become human needs.”*

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## Endnotes

1. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion*, is available from Barnes & Noble at [www.barnesandnoble.com/w/man-is-not-alone-abraham-joshua-heschel/1111811406](http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/man-is-not-alone-abraham-joshua-heschel/1111811406).
2. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), pp. 241-251. Copyright 1951 by Abraham Joshua Heschel; renewed 1979 by Sylvia Heschel.
3. See note 2.

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