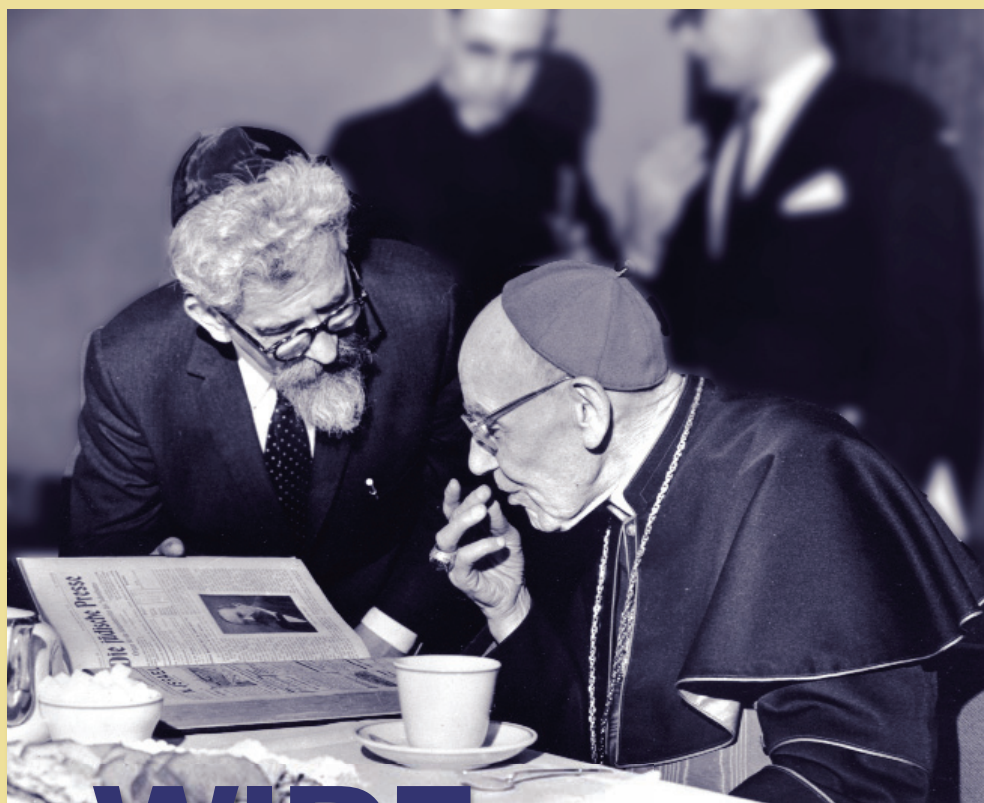




WIDE HORIZONS

Abraham Joshua Heschel, AJC,
and the Spirit of Nostra Aetate

Gary Spruch

AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

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The American Jewish Committee protects the rights and freedoms of Jews the world over; combats bigotry and anti-Semitism and promotes human rights for all; works for the security of Israel and deepened understanding between Americans and Israelis; advocates public policy positions rooted in American democratic values and the perspectives of the Jewish heritage; and enhances the creative vitality of the Jewish people. Founded in 1906, it is the pioneer human-relations agency in the United States.

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AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

Gary Spruch is AJC's assistant director of publications. He writes AJC's Annual Report and edits its quarterly newsletter, AJC Today. His articles have appeared in Jewish newspapers around the country.

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Aknowledgments

Deepest gratitude to my father, Harvey Spruch, my counselor, advisor, dear friend, and devoted editor.

Foreword

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who died in 1972, is one of the most beloved and still widely read rabbis of the twentieth century. Philosophical, theological, profound, yet readily accessible, Heschel's beautiful prose writings probe the human condition and the relationship between human beings and God. His themes are timeless; his post-Holocaust faith is soothing and gives hope. It is interesting that he is widely read among Christian theologians as well as among Jews.

Heschel is partly well regarded because his life and his actions reflected the moral stances he took, requiring people to partner with God in the work of *tikkun olam*, of repairing the world. He was not content to remain in the ivory tower of academia, but felt compelled to come down and take an active role in the issues of his day. Thus he marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in Selma, Alabama (observing later that, as he marched with Dr. King, "my feet were praying"), and he spoke out eloquently against the war in Vietnam.

The important chapter of his life for which Rabbi Heschel is least known, however, may be that in which his insights have had the most long-lasting and far-reaching effects. Gary Spruch, in this booklet, *Wide Horizons: Abraham Joshua Heschel, AJC, and the Spirit of Nostra Aetate*, sheds fresh light on a subject that has until now been little known and even less understood. Rabbi Heschel was brought into the discussions with the Vatican by his former student Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, who served as director of interreligious affairs for the American Jewish Committee. AJC had been involved with Vatican II from its inception, working to keep the possibility of change in the relationship between the Church and the Jews cen-

tral to this historic opening up of Church doctrine. Heschel drafted the third official memorandum that AJC submitted to the Vatican on the relationship between Christianity and the Jews. Titled *On Improving Catholic-Jewish Relations*, this paper, instead of dwelling any longer on the past, presented the basis for a way forward.

As the work of Vatican II wore on, Rabbi Heschel and AJC remained deeply involved in the development of what would eventually become the groundbreaking statement *Nostra Aetate*.

Nostra Aetate, though concerned with relationships between the Roman Catholic Church and all other religions, is understood to have changed most deeply the relationship between the Church and the Jews. Even as this relationship continues to evolve and the understanding of the meaning of *Nostra Aetate* continues to unfold, the distinct imprint of Rabbi Heschel can still be felt. Although Heschel's role in this most important chapter in Catholic-Jewish relations is not well-known, it may well be here that his great moral voice, his deep theological thought, and his true love of humanity will have had their most lasting effect.

Rabbi Gary Greenebaum
U.S. Director of Interreligious Affairs
American Jewish Committee

Wide Horizons: Abraham Joshua Heschel, AJC, and the Spirit of *Nostra Aetate*

Abraham Joshua Heschel and Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who later became the Lubavitcher rebbe, both made the unusual decision to study philosophy at the University of Berlin. These two sons of Hasidic nobility were motivated, no doubt, by the spiritual yearning and intense intellectual curiosity they shared in common. Later on, however, there was little in common about the missions they pursued when they emerged as American Jewish leaders of immense influence.

Rabbi Schneerson aimed to bring Jews, to whatever degree possible, into the world of Hasidism. He advocated a unique approach to lovingly spreading the message of Judaism through Lubavitch Hasidism. He lectured extensively, wrote a wide range of accessible Jewish literature and, at the same time, assembled a worldwide army of emissaries to do the job of bringing the Jews to Judaism.

Rabbi Heschel, on the other hand, sought to bring Hasidism—its passion, its profound moral concern, its commitment to spiritual search—to the Jews and even, to some extent, to the world. The times had changed, and Heschel indeed had counseled: “Don’t be old. Don’t be stale. See life as all doors. Some are open, some are closed. You have to know how to open them.” As was particularly clear with his efforts related to Vatican II, the momentous 1962-65 conclave of the Catholic Church, Heschel was determined to “open doors.” He believed that doing so demanded he underscore an element of Judaism not emphasized in Hasidic Eastern Europe.

After all, how could the values of the ancient Jewish prophets, of whom Heschel was a dedicated student, find expression among Jews

living cloistered lives in a largely inhospitable world? What forum did the Jews have to cry out for justice? To demand righteousness and respect for the dignity of all? To act as a light unto the nations, not only by serving as an example on a small scale, but by raising a collective voice on behalf of the most cherished human values?

In addition, quite simply, how could Heschel hold back from proclaiming these prophetic values, especially in light of the Holocaust—the onslaught of hate from which he himself had narrowly escaped, but that cost the lives of his mother, two of his three sisters, and many beloved friends? How could he hold back, not only with regard to the universal quest for justice, but also with regard to publicly confronting the anti-Semitism that had wound its way through history and exploded, so recently, in unimaginably cruel and lethal ways?

“I live in Auschwitz,” Heschel once declared. “Since Auschwitz I have only one rule of thumb for what I say: Would it be acceptable to those people who were burned there?” Clearly, Heschel saw himself as a voice of his people. And in three key historic moments of the postwar era—the struggle for civil rights, Vatican II, and the movement to end the Vietnam War—he did emerge as a voice of his people, which is not to say that he stayed clear of criticism in the Jewish community.

His strongly expressed opinions could ruffle feathers, even of those in agreement with him. His easy use of theological language in the public square did not sit well with some then, and would certainly not today. With regard to his Vatican II efforts, the focus of this booklet, some questioned the value of appealing to the Catholic Church. And yet, despite all this, his voice resonated powerfully, leaving a lasting legacy that continues, thirty-five years after his death, to inspire Jews across the denominational spectrum. What sets him apart? Rabbi A. James Rudin, the American Jewish Committee’s senior interreligious consultant, believes it was his “extraordinary combination of modernity and rich religious tradition.”

A towering figure in contemporary Jewish thought, Heschel wrote more than a dozen books on philosophy, prayer, and symbol-

ism and is perhaps the most widely read Jewish thinker of his generation. He also directly influenced and inspired generations of students, first, at Hebrew Union College, where he taught for five years after the school saved his life by bringing him to America on a scholar’s visa, and then at the Jewish Theological Seminary, where he served as professor from 1946 until his death, at 65, in 1972.

A Momentous Conclave

Throughout the three years of Vatican II, Heschel compellingly brought together his faith and his dedication to social activism. But he very pointedly added something else, something not called for in his civil rights work or his efforts to end the Vietnam War—a fierce commitment to Holocaust memory and, in general, to the dignity and integrity of Judaism and the Jewish people.

Vatican II, the Second Ecumenical Council, marked only the second time since 1868 that leaders of the Catholic Church from around the world had gathered in Rome to discuss, delineate, and decide upon aspects of Church doctrine. Of intense interest to the Jewish people were plans by the Church to address various questions surrounding the nature of Church teaching on the Jews and the nature of Church relations with the Jews.

In preparing for this event, and in following the proceedings as they moved forward over a three-year period, AJC contacted and consulted with a range of top Jewish scholars representing every denomination. And yet no consultant played the role Heschel did, meeting regularly with Church officials and acting as an AJC representative and spokesman.

In that role, according to Edward K. Kaplan, author of *Spiritual Radical: Abraham Joshua Heschel in America*, he “significantly influenced the drafting of *Nostra Aetate* (In our time), the ‘Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,’” which reversed the tide of history, ushering in a time of extremely fruitful relations between the Jewish community and the Catholic Church.

Catholic theologian Dr. Eva Fleischner, author of *Cries in the Night: Women Who Challenged the Holocaust*, about Catholic women

who helped save European Jews, summed up Heschel's role at Vatican II this way: “We have here the extraordinary phenomenon of a religious Jewish thinker, utterly, profoundly Jewish, from a long Hasidic line, who not only reached out to and touched the lives of Christian theologians and two popes, but who influenced the outcome of the Roman Church's relationship to the Jews through Vatican II's declaration *Nostra Aetate*.”

Working very closely with Heschel on this task were two AJC professionals, Zachariah Shuster, serving as European director, and Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, serving as director of interreligious affairs. Tanenbaum, in fact, had been a student of Heschel's at the Jewish Theological Seminary, where Heschel taught Jewish ethics and mysticism. He had edited some of Heschel's early works, becoming a great believer in Heschel's vision and leadership capabilities. Throughout the years of Vatican II, Tanenbaum and Heschel were in contact on an almost daily basis.

The two enjoyed a warm friendship and shared a strong desire to build relations with the Catholic Church. There were, to be sure, reciprocal feelings among leaders in the Church. Most significantly, those feelings could be found in the pope who called Vatican II, John XXIII, Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli. And they were evident as well in the man he appointed to head the Church effort with regard to the Jews, Augustine Cardinal Bea, a German keenly aware of the Holocaust and an accomplished scholar of the Old Testament, who presided over the Vatican's Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity.

The general outline of Heschel's efforts as an AJC consultant on Vatican II presented in this booklet was gleaned from a paper by Tanenbaum, *Heschel and Vatican II—Jewish-Christian Relations*, which he presented in 1983 at a memorial symposium in Heschel's honor held at the Jewish Theological Seminary. That paper, along with the sources of most of the remarks by Rabbi Heschel and Cardinal Bea in these pages, can be found in the AJC Archives Interreligious Affairs collection and in AJC's Blaustein Library vertical files.

“You Are Entitled to More than Hope”

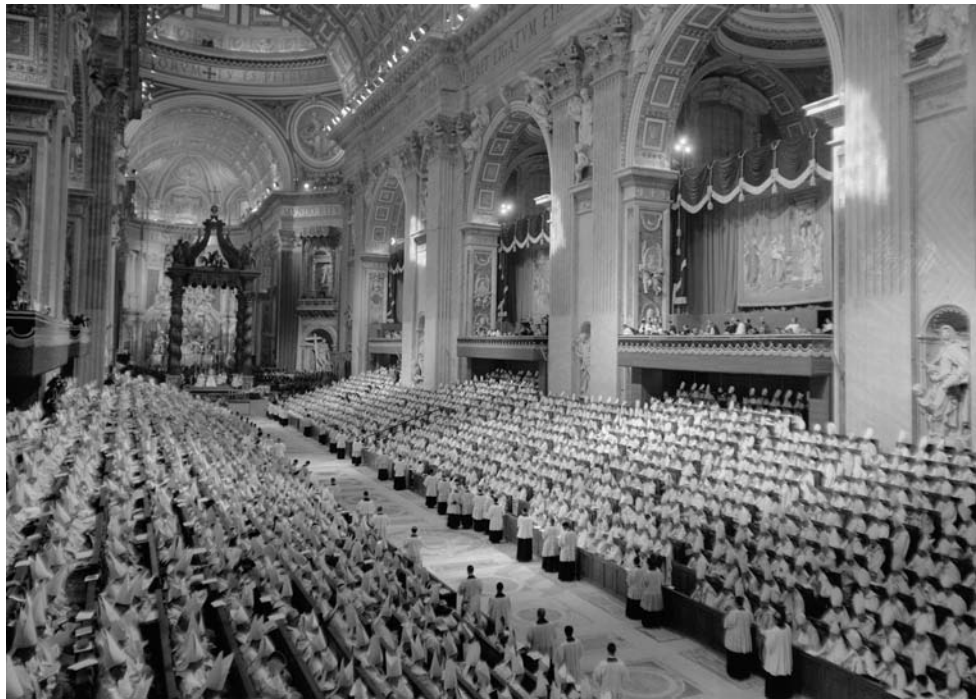
Near the start of his papacy, in 1958, Pope John XXII entered into a series of discussions with a Jewish historian, Jules Isaac, who had lost his wife and daughter in the Holocaust. Isaac had the chance to speak with the pope at length about both the Holocaust and the harmful consequences of some Church teachings. At one point, Isaac, before departing, asked the pope, “Can I leave with hope?” A question to which the pope replied: “You are entitled to more than hope.”

A famously humble man, Pope John once wrote that he had disciplined himself to care “nothing for the judgments of the world, even the ecclesiastical world.” This inner fortitude and strength of character, no doubt, served him well when opposition mounted, by conservatives within the Church, and by Arab leaders, to his plans for the Church to constructively reconsider certain of its views toward the Jewish people.

Any reconsideration of the Church's teachings on the Jews aroused antagonism among those Church leaders who saw no problem and felt no need for the Church to address the ways in which its teachings had fostered contempt. For many Arab leaders, any demonstrative sign of consideration on the part of the Church toward the Jews would be tantamount to an expression of support for the State of Israel, which had been established only fifteen years before the launch of Vatican II.

During the course of Vatican II, the pressure from these groups was very real, and included the distribution to participants, on a few occasions, of viciously anti-Semitic literature. In addition, the government of Gamal Abdul Nasser, then president of Egypt, was busy spreading the message that a “world Zionist plot” had been hatched to take advantage of Vatican II. In the end, Pope John did not accomplish all it seemed he wished to accomplish with regard to the Church's declaration on the Jews, but that is likely attributable only to the fact that he died in the midst of Vatican II, on June 4, 1963.

L. to r: Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel;
Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum,
AJC Director of Interreligious Affairs;
and Augustine Cardinal Bea,
on March 31, 1963, at AJC headquarters
in New York for a meeting to discuss issues
related to Vatican II. AJC officers and scholars
affiliated with a wide range of leading
Jewish institutions participated.



View of St. Peter's Basilica during the inauguration of Vatican II on October 11, 1963.
More than 2,700 Church leaders from around the world gathered in Rome for the proceedings.
It was only the second such gathering since 1868.



Augustine Cardinal Bea addresses a dinner held in his honor, on April 1, 1963,
organized by AJC. A German keenly aware of the Holocaust and an Old Testament scholar,
he headed the Church's efforts with regard to the Jews at Vatican II.
He and Rabbi Heschel developed a warm friendship.



A week before Vatican II opened,
Pope John XXIII, Angelo Giuseppe
Roncalli, who called the conclave,
sets off on a pilgrimage to pray for
its success. He once wrote that
he had disciplined himself to care
"nothing for the judgments of the
world, even the ecclesiastical world."

His successor, Pope Paul VI, was indeed a strong supporter of Pope John's goals in this arena. Pope Paul made the decision to see the declaration through, and he shepherded it with care. But he may not have had quite the stamina Pope John did to withstand "the judgments of the world." In the end, some diminishment did take place in the fullness of the original vision, as articulated in different ways at different times by Pope John and, more elaborately, by Cardinal Bea and Rabbi Heschel.

The Image of the Jew in Catholic Teaching

Tanenbaum, at AJC's 1967 Annual Meeting, looked back at Vatican II. He discussed the concerns of those in the Jewish community who doubted the worth of Jewish engagement with the Church and even feared it. He pointed out that, quite understandably, many with such views were among those most directly and grievously affected by anti-Semitism in Christian lands. He went on to explain why he objected to that viewpoint, putting forward a compelling rationale for AJC's Vatican II efforts and its ongoing commitment to Christian-Jewish dialogue. As Tanenbaum saw it, such work was part and parcel of AJC efforts to combat anti-Semitism. Resisting anti-Semitism, he asserted, demanded not only opposition to its most outward manifestations, but also working against the various sources from which it emerged. In his address, Tanenbaum observed:

My friends, there is no future for the Jewish people in the countries of Islam. There is no significant future for the Jews in what was once the secular utopia of the proletariat in the Soviet Union. The overwhelming majority of the Jewish people today find their being and their having in essentially a Christian Western society, and the State of Israel finds that its fate and its future is profoundly laid with the destiny of the countries of the free West.

Therefore the whole question of the relationship of Jews and the Jewish community to the Christian world is not just a matter of abstraction or of theology. It is a matter of the greatest existential reality to the Jewish people and it seems to me that at

this moment of openness, we have an obligation, not just as a matter of moral sentiment or of piety, but as a matter of the most significant Jewish policy ... to see the new possibilities that are open for us in relationships with the Christian world, to move together to create that kind of society which is the deepest hope and aspiration of the noblest traditions of Judaism.

Whatever the mix of practical and idealistic motives that prompted AJC's involvement in Vatican II, Tanenbaum understood that idealism, and the language of idealism, would prove the key to opening any doors. This understanding, no doubt, persuaded him to reach out to Heschel. After all, Heschel not only masterfully communicated Judaism's particularistic and universalistic ideals, but did so in a way that forcefully emphasized the moral agency, the profound and urgent personal responsibility, of every individual.

Heschel's initial contribution to the AJC effort came in the form of the third official memorandum AJC submitted to the Vatican on the issues involved. Heschel's piece, done in full collaboration with Tanenbaum and others at AJC, was the most positive of the three memoranda in tone and focus, and certainly the most poetic and prophetic in sensibility. The other two memoranda were of a more critical and documentary nature. In fact, they presented an entirely unvarnished picture of insensitive, negative, and sometimes malicious material in Catholic teachings about Jews.

The first, submitted in 1961, in response to a series of questions posed by Cardinal Bea in meetings with him, was entitled *The Image of the Jew in Catholic Teaching*. It was largely drawn from earlier studies of Catholic textbooks that AJC had conducted together with Jesuit St. Louis University. And it was built upon the pioneering efforts, in this area, of Sister Rose Thering, an American nun of the Dominican order who devoted much of her life to Holocaust education and the improvement of relations between Christians and Jews. The second memorandum, entitled *Anti-Jewish Elements in Catholic Liturgy*, like the first, underscored instances in which the Jews were portrayed in an extremely negative light.

Sensing that it was time to move in a different direction, AJC arranged a meeting at the Vatican with Cardinal Bea. In discussions

with Cardinal Bea, Heschel and other AJC representatives discerned what the cardinal would now like to see happen. What he requested at this time was essentially a set of recommendations placed in a broad context, which he could share with the members of his Secretariat. Heschel rose to the occasion with brilliance, taking the lead in preparing a memorandum, submitted in May 1962, entitled *On Improving Catholic-Jewish Relations*.

Heschel set the stage this way:

With humility and in the spirit of commitment to the prophets of Israel, let us consider the grave problems that confront us all as the children of God. Both Judaism and Christianity share the prophets' belief that God chooses agents through whom His will is made known and His work done throughout history. Both Judaism and Christianity live in the certainty that mankind is in need of ultimate redemption, that God is involved in human history, that in relations between man and man, God is at stake...

He went further, dramatically articulating his philosophy of "God in search of man," his religious humanism, and his enormous faith in man's capacity to help fix the world, to engage in what Jewish tradition calls *Tikkun Olam*.

"The universe is done," he declared. "The greater masterpiece still undone, still in process of being created, is history. For accomplishing His grand design God needs the help of man.... Life is clay, and righteousness the mold in which God wants history to be shaped.... God calls for mercy and righteousness; this demand of His cannot be satisfied only in temples ... but in history, in time. It is within the realm of history that man has to carry out God's mission."

The Grave Harm of Slander

Before moving to specifics, he touched upon the terrible nature of intergroup and international hatred. His words recall the extensive traditional Jewish teachings about the grave harm of *lashon hara*, evil speech, slandering and speaking ill of others. But he lifted up the

traditional emphasis, clarifying and making central the global nature of these concerns.

Said Heschel:

It is from the inner life of men and from the articulation of evil thoughts that evil actions take their rise. It is therefore of extreme importance that the sinfulness of thoughts of suspicion and hatred and particularly the sinfulness of any contemptuous utterance, however flippantly it is meant, be made clear to all mankind. This applies in particular to such thoughts and utterances about individuals or groups of other religions, races and nations.

After spelling out which "thoughts and utterances" had led to trouble in the history of Christian-Jewish relations, Heschel presented four proposals. First, he called for the Church to "reject and condemn those who assert that the Jews as a people" are responsible for the crucifixion and because of this are "accursed and condemned to suffer dispersion and deprivation throughout the ages." Second, he proposed that the Church cease its efforts to convert the Jews and instead acknowledge the "existence of the Jews as Jews," "their loyalty to the Torah," and the "high price in suffering and martyrdom" the Jews have paid for "preserving the Covenant and the legacy of holiness in faith and devotion." "Genuine love," Heschel wrote, "implies that Jews be accepted as Jews."

In his third proposal, Heschel asked the Church to set up mechanisms by which Church members would be exposed to the realities of "Jewish life and the spiritual and moral dimension of Jewish existence in the last two thousand years." Fourth, and finally, he spoke of the ancient Jewish prophets' "remorseless unveiling of injustice and oppression, in their comprehension of social, political, and religious evils," and proposed that the Church directly confront the "evil of indifference" by establishing a permanent commission dedicated to "eliminating prejudice and watching over Christian-Jewish relations everywhere" and that similar commissions be established at the diocese level.

Remarkable Interreligious Gatherings

Vatican II opened in the fall of 1962. The Church's declaration on the Jews went through many changes during the conclave's four sessions. Heschel and AJC stayed involved throughout the entire process. There were meetings with many Church leaders and, at one point, in March 1963, a remarkable meeting with Cardinal Bea at AJC headquarters in New York.

Among those accompanying the cardinal were Msgr. Johannes Willebrands, who served as secretary of Cardinal Bea's Vatican II Secretariat, and Father Felix Morlion, president of Rome's Pro Deo University. Heschel served as chairman of the gathering. With him were AJC officers as well as Jewish leaders affiliated with institutions such as the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Rabbinical Seminary of America, the Synagogue Council of America, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and Yeshiva University.

At the meeting, Cardinal Bea responded to questions about the "deicide" charge, that the Jews were collectively responsible for Jesus's death. He assured those gathered that confronting this issue was central to his Secretariat's work. He shared his firm belief that Vatican II presented an opportunity for the Church to refute such charges within the framework of Catholic theology. Among other issues discussed, the cardinal explained the Church's intention to help in the general struggle against prejudice by using Vatican II as a forum to denounce unjust generalizations against any group and produce guidelines promoting justice and love toward all human groups.

On the evening following this meeting, AJC organized a dinner in the cardinal's honor at New York's Plaza Hotel. Over 400 Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish leaders attended. Dais guests included UN Secretary-General U Thant; Muhammad Zafrulla Kahn, Pakistan's permanent representative to the UN and president of the UN General Assembly; Francis Cardinal Spellman, the archbishop of New York; Richard Cardinal Cushing, the archbishop of Boston; Archbishop Iakovos, primate of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America; Reverend Henry Pitney Van Dusen, president of the Union Theological Seminary; New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller; and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.

Searching out New Paths

In his address to the gathering, Cardinal Bea explained that nearness and interaction alone can in no way guarantee understanding and respect among groups. He warned that nearness can, in fact, become a prompt for hatred and destruction. "Why is this?" he asked rhetorically. He then answered his question, touching upon the root ideas behind his own commitment, and his Church's, to searching out new paths to help build a world of "unity" and "liberty." He explained that the "unity" he sought was not the unity of a well-oiled machine. What it demanded, he said, was the labor and love of human beings.

It is the conscious, free decision of responsible persons to unite with other responsible persons, in order to live together in peaceful harmony. It is the conscious encounter of free men, the mutual exchange in giving and receiving what each one has, not merely of material goods, but also, and above all, of spiritual riches.

But talking about the ideals of "unity" and "liberty" would not suffice, declared the cardinal. One must understand the meaning of these words. He began with "liberty," making clear his belief that only when an individual enjoys the liberty to seek the truth, to choose his destiny according to his own conscience, will he come to understand the necessity of granting that right to others. Only then can unity flourish. The cardinal, however, offered a caveat: "Conscience, of course, excludes anarchy, and confirms the existence of a whole world of moral obligations and thus also of man's duties regarding his fellow men."

In explicating his understanding of "unity," the cardinal emphasized that in becoming aware of the greatness of one's own freedom, a person should, necessarily, gain a heightened awareness of the need for unity. Each one of us, after all, he explained, "can only develop in society, that is, in a reciprocal giving and receiving with other persons."

In this receiving from other persons and from society, and in making his own contribution, man enriches himself, develops his

own personality, and contributes to the complete development and full manifestation of the immense potentialities latent in himself and in humanity. In this development and manifestation, all nations and races, with their specific characteristics, their varied creations of human intelligence, and their distinct cultures have a place. All are working together, inserting thread after thread in that magnificent carpet which is the human family.

In his remarks at the event, Heschel, too, addressed questions regarding unity and mutual respect. He spoke of Judaism's sacred belief that the righteous of all faiths will share a place in Heaven. To strengthen his point, he quoted from the Prophet Malachi (1:11): “From the rising of the sun to its setting My name is great among the nations, in every place incense is offered to My name, and a pure offering; for My name is great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts.”

“What will save us?” Heschel asked. He answered: “God and our ability to stand in awe of each other's faith, of each other's commitment.” He continued, delineating his own vision while laying out clearly the meaning of faith without fundamentalism:

This is the agony of history: bigotry, the failure to revere each other's faith. We must insist upon loyalty to the unique treasures of our own tradition and at the same time acknowledge that in this eon religious diversity may well be the will of God.

Touching upon Cardinal Bea's theme, Heschel declared: “Man's greatest task is to comprehend God's respect and regard for the freedom of man, freedom, the supreme manifestation of God's regard for man. Man's most precious thought is God, but God's most precious thought is man.”

“I Am Ready to Go to Auschwitz”

At one point, as the declaration on the Jews went through a variety of drafts, it seemed from press reports that the Church was considering statements that condemned anti-Semitism, but also sought “the eventual union of the Jewish people with the Church.” Heschel was alarmed. He was convinced that a call for conversion was

against the spirit of what the Church sought to accomplish, that such a statement would therefore entirely undermine any good done by the declaration. For Heschel, a call to conversion was tantamount to calling for the elimination of Judaism.

In the midst of an intimate talk with a close Catholic friend, the theologian Gustav Weigel, Heschel once posed the following question: “Is it really the will of God that there be no more Judaism in the world? Would it really be the triumph of God if the scrolls of the Torah would no more be taken out of the Ark and the Torah no more be read in synagogue...?”

Heschel, however, did understand that the Church was unlikely ever to explicitly relinquish its longtime hope for the conversion of the Jews. During a meeting in Rome with Msgr. Willebrands, he once suggested a stratagem for change found in rabbinic law, whereby an outmoded practice or belief is not renounced, but simply ignored.

In light of the press reports he had seen, Heschel felt compelled to issue a forceful statement. In it, he referred to wording in the draft then under consideration that spoke of reaching for “reciprocal understanding and appreciation.” He then declared: “Spiritual fratricide is hardly a means for the attainment” of these goals. “As I have repeatedly stated to leading personalities of the Vatican,” he wrote, “I am ready to go to Auschwitz any time, if faced with the alternative of conversion or death.”

In September 1964, against the background of these concerns, Heschel and Shuster met privately at the Vatican with Pope Paul.

In October 1965, when Pope Paul promulgated the historic Vatican II declaration *Nostra Aetate*, the document did not disavow conversionary goals, but it also did not call for conversion or even for the “eventual union of the Jewish people with the Church,” which in itself was groundbreaking on the Church's part. With regard to condemning anti-Semitism and rejecting the charge that the Jews were collectively responsible for the death of Jesus, the document was certainly clear and forthright, though it did not go as far as some had hoped. Moving beyond specific Jewish concerns, the

document also included a strong general condemnation of “discrimination between man and man or people and people.”

Passed by an overwhelming majority, *Nostra Aetate* was unquestionably the beginning of a new chapter in Church history. In 1990, then AJC president Sholom Comay declared that with regard to Catholic-Jewish relations, Vatican II launched “one of the great success stories of the century.” In 2005, upon the fortieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, Rabbi Gilbert S. Rosenthal, executive director of the National Council of Synagogues, echoed a widely held view when he wrote that “the main points of the statement [*Nostra Aetate*] represent a Copernican revolution in Catholic thinking about the Jewish religion and people.”

The Humane Spirit of *Nostra Aetate*

The fact is, however, that the humane spirit of *Nostra Aetate*, a spirit so central to Heschel’s vision, should not be seen as something that the Catholic Church alone must keep alive and fulfill. Over the years, *Nostra Aetate* has taken on a meaning larger than its immediate context. Father John Pawlikowski, director of Catholic-Jewish Studies at the Catholic Theological Union and head of the International Council on Christians and Jews, has spoken of the unusual level of attention *Nostra Aetate* continues to receive and its ever increasing relevance.

The issue of religion as a source of violence and contempt is still very much a part of the reality of the world today. *Nostra Aetate* presents an opportunity to counteract the violent impulse in religion, which if not counteracted, will prevent religion from making the positive contributions to global solidarity and harmony that it has the potential to offer.

Heschel, no doubt, would have agreed. In fighting for the integrity of Judaism and the Jewish people, he was fighting, along with AJC, for the integrity of all religious traditions, for mutual respect among nations and peoples, and for the freedom of conscience that is due every human being.

In a 1966 essay, Heschel, quite prophetically, used the language

of global interdependence. “Our era marks the end of complacency, the end of evasion, the end of self-reliance.... Interdependence of political and economic conditions all over the world is a basic fact of our situation. Disorder in a small obscure country in any part of the world evokes anxiety in people all over the world.” He insisted that we all, inevitably, are involved with one another, deeply affected by each others’ attitudes and behavior. “Horizons are wider, dangers are greater.... No religion is an island.”

Heschel and the Work Ahead

These same sentiments were movingly expressed by then AJC president E. Robert Goodkind when, in March 2006, leading an AJC delegation, he addressed Pope Benedict XVI at the Vatican: “We at AJC believe that our extensive and ongoing global efforts to foster good relations among all faith communities—especially in the Holy Land—constitute a pressing moral responsibility that is of the greatest significance for world peace.”

Goodkind went on to speak of *Shir HaShirim*, the Song of Solomon. He shared with the pope a commentary on *Shir HaShirim* by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first chief rabbi of Palestine. Kook, like Heschel, delighted in the profoundly universal longings expressed in this text. Goodkind said that Kook described *Shir HaShirim* as a progressive, fourfold song, which includes within it a song of one’s own self, a song of one’s own community, a song of all people everywhere and, finally, a song of all existence. He concluded his remarks to the pope by offering a prayer: “That we may strive together to make the beautiful Song of Solomon heard, in all its fullness, as far and wide as possible.”

A conference held in December 2007, at New York City’s Center for Jewish History commemorated the 100th year of Heschel’s birth with eight hours of talks and breakout sessions dedicated to the man and his thought. A cross-denominational crowd of more than 200 attended. Among the many presenters, both Jewish and non-Jewish, were David Ellenson, president of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion; Arnold Eisen, chancellor of the

Jewish Theological Seminary; Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer, director of Religious Studies at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College; and Saul Berman, currently director of continuing rabbinic education at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah. Many such conferences and gatherings have been held throughout the years.

It seems, indeed, that Heschel's influence—as rabbi, philosopher, mystic, and social activist—only continues to grow, and it is the least known of his public endeavors, his efforts with regard to Vatican II, that help most to explain why. They reveal much about his vision of Judaism, the Jewish future, and humanity's future. Like most of us today, Heschel was comfortable in many cultures and lived in many worlds. His wisdom reflects that breadth of understanding. His legacy points the way for an American Judaism serious about tradition, open to the gifts of others, and willing to speak out with a strong moral voice to help shape history, what Heschel so characteristically called the “masterpiece still undone.”



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