

# *The Sabbath*

By Abraham Joshua Heschel

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Abraham Joshua Heschel was born into a Polish-Jewish family with a long history of leadership in the Hasidic world. As a young man, Heschel went off to Germany, which was then the center of modern Jewish scholarship (*Wissenschaft des Judenthum*) to earn a Ph.D. at the University of Berlin. During that phase of his life, he viewed secular German science as intellectually superior to the spiritual inheritance of his own Hasidic-Jewish tradition.

Heschel had cast away the Orthodox Jewish prayers and rituals that ordered every moment of his life back in Poland. One evening, as he strolled along the stately boulevards of pre-World War II Berlin, he was overcome by an urge to recite the familiar evening prayer of his youth. For the first time in years, he recited from memory the first benediction preceding the recital of *Shema* ("Hear O Israel", Deuteronomy 6:4):

Blessed are Thou, Lord our God, King of the universe, who by His word brings on the evenings, by his wisdom opens gates, by his perception shifts time, changes the hours, orders the stars in the firmament according to his will; creates day and night...<sup>1</sup>

At this moment, Heschel's values paradigm shifted away from Berlin and back to his roots. His admiration for the scientifically advanced, yet essentially pagan, culture of pre-war Germany gave way to a renewed appreciation of his spiritual and religious heritage. At this defining moment on the streets of Berlin, Heschel perceived the importance of *time over space*, and this is the central theme of *The Sabbath*.

Heschel wrote *The Sabbath* in the U.S. two decades after his transformative stroll in Berlin. *The Sabbath* is still regarded as a classic, yet fairly accessible, modern text on Jewish spirituality. The book's relevance extends beyond Judaism, and its lessons apply to all those who seek a spiritual Sabbath experience.

The central idea of *The Sabbath* is that a material-technological culture and pagan civilizations are largely

concerned about *space*, while Judaism and other monotheistic religions are focused on *time*:

Unlike the space-minded man to whom time is unvaried, iterative, homogeneous, to whom all hours are alike, quality-less, empty shells, the Bible senses the diversified character of time. There are no two hours alike. Every hour is unique and the only one given at the moment, exclusive, and endlessly precious.

There is a mystical Jewish notion that all human qualities, even those which are corrupt and ugly, can be transformed to good. Rather than completely suppressing the instinct of greed, we should transform the instinct into a "positive greed." Human nature covets the things of space: "his neighbor's house, wife, manservant, maid-servant, ox, ass, and everything belonging to his neighbor" (cf. p.83; tenth commandment). The Sabbath challenges us to instead covet the things of time. During the six days of work, we sacrifice time to improve space. On the Sabbath, we cease to sacrifice time; we jealously guard each moment of the Sabbath. We value Sabbath time not in order to profitably transform it into space (i.e., time is money) but for its own sake.

According to Heschel, the Ten Commandments consist of analogs. The Sabbath commandment is the analog of "Thou shalt not covet (material things)"; on the Sabbath "Thou shalt covet (*spiritual* time)." This prescriptive commandment to covet the time of Sabbath is the antithesis commandment of "Thou Shalt Not Covet (the things of *space*)." The Sabbath commandment, which is the fifth commandment on the first tablet, is the counterpoint of "thou shalt not covet," the tenth and final commandment on the second tablet.

The primacy of *time over place* has implications for the professional who seeks to integrate biblical teachings into business practice and education. Heschel's insight about the primacy of time over space has practical implications not just for the Sabbath but also for the workweek.

The Bible teaches that our primary focus should be on how to spend our limited time while our secondary focus should be on achieving specific objectives. This suggests that a professional's most important decision is how to allocate his or her limited time to reach both spiritual and temporal goals. All other decisions, even those of great ethical and strategic importance, are secondary to the decision of how to allocate time.

#### ENDNOTE

- <sup>1</sup> *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Prophetic Witness*, by Edward K. Kaplan and Samuel H. Dresner, Yale University Press, 1998, 159.