

Physical Midrash: Abraham Joshua Heschel and Prophets

Scope of Program: This program is designed for High School students who are learning about Judaism and Social Justice. The program could fit in particularly well in preparation for a high school trip to the RAC or a civil rights tour in the south. The program creates a framework of a narrative and supplemental activities that should be adapted based on space, age group, or specific areas the instructor wants to focus on. Feel free to make it your own!

Enduring understandings:

1. Learn about the life of Abraham Joshua Heschel and the moments that led him to become leader in social justice.
2. Explore the text and voice of our prophetic tradition and how Heschel understood the prophets.
3. Articulate issues that are important to themselves and their responsibility to act on them.

Narrator reads, *The year is 1917 and you are in Poland. It is Friday morning. And that meant that it was almost Shabbat! As you ran from your house to your rabbi's studies you could smell the smells of Shabbat. The freshly made Challah, the chicken soup, and the babka's baking in the oven. There was a certain buzz around town on Friday mornings. Everyone was busy getting ready. You were just a 10 year old boy, however, and you did as you were told. Your family demanded that you study, and it was something you truly loved doing. Every single day you met with the best and brightest tutors. At this point, you have covered it all... Torah, Talmud, the Zohar, Jewish Mysticism. If you've heard of it, you have read it. As you walked in to the study this morning, everyone stood up as you entered. You were a prince! An heir to the great hasidic tradition and being groomed as the next great rebbe. People called to you an illui, a genius, but you didn't let it get to your head. Your family lived a modest life, as everyone in the community, but it was the community that kept everyone together. Everyone lifted each other up.*

Narrator continues, *The Year is 1928 and you are now living in Berlin, Germany. You have been in Berlin for about a year and you are constantly amazed at the booming life and culture this city has to offer. You are studying for your PHD and are in conversation with fellow students and professors, Jewish and non Jewish. You treasure these relationships as they have become your new family. Your professors are good to you and empower you to explore and develop your own scholarship. You are commissioned to write your first book, a biography on Maimonides. As you dive into and learn about the great medieval rabbi and thinker, you are amazed at his ability to remain faithful to God, even after experiencing such tremendous hardships. This perspective will hold influence over you for the rest of your life. After your Maimonides biography is met with tremendous success, you take it upon yourself to write a biography on another medieval rabbi, Abravanel. As you are writing this, you are amazed at the comparison of his worldview with the world you are experiencing today. You view this project as*

a book of comfort to his fellow European Jews, arguing that, while the Jews faced hardship and expulsion from Spain, they were better off, writing: "had the Jews remained in the Iberian peninsula, they would certainly have participating in the actions of the Conquistadors. When the Conquistadors arrived in Haiti, there were 1,100,000 inhabitants; twenty years later there were only 1,000 remaining."

Yet, you remain troubled at what is going on in Germany. You are wondering why more people don't speak out. You are infuriated that your teachers, the teachers you cherished and respected, are no longer giving you time because you are Jewish. As you continue to work on your thesis, about Prophecy, you are continually inspired head the prophetic call yourself.

Activity: Participants will engage in a text study on Prophets. Quotes from Heschel's *The Prophets* will be posted around the room with a question. Students will take time to respond to the questions, writing it on the paper.

Explain, Just as Heschel studied, became inspired, and wrote about the Prophetic tradition in Judaism, so to, will we! Here is a little taste on how Heschel viewed the role of prophets as well as some quotes from our prophetic texts. Feel free to add your commentary to both!

See supplemental paper below for quotes and questions.

Narrator continues, *Things in Germany were getting bad. You sensed that the political environment was changing. The modern, open city of Berlin was now filled with prejudice. You began to think about leaving Berlin when no German publication would publish your Thesis. Your professors would respond to each of your letters with Heil Hitler. This caused you great concern. Your PhD was riding on this. You needed publication to receive your PhD, and you needed to receive your PhD to immigrate to London or America. You were in conversation with Professor Morgenstern of the Hebrew Union College in America. He was working diligently to bring you to safety, but you desperately needed the PhD. Finally, a publisher in Warsaw published your Thesis!*

But danger remained. The Jewish people were being persecuted once again. There was a Jesuit librarian at your school that refused to speak out against the Nazi treatment of Jews for fear that the Nazis would close down the library. This profoundly impacted your view that it was imperative for religious people to speak out against social injustice. You famously said, "Racism is satanism, unmitigated evil... You cannot worship God and at the same time look at man as if he were a horse."

(as you are reading this, you will simulate the narrative as a group) *One week before Kristallnacht, The German police, the Gestapo, came in and said you have 10 minutes to pack your bags before going back to Warsaw. You were deported from Germany because you were Jewish. The conditions to Warsaw were horrific. You stood for three days straight, crammed into a tiny train car. When you arrive, you and everyone was with you waited in camps as the Polish*

government would not let you in. Luckily your family were able to bring you back, but you knew you had to leave. You fled to England and stayed with your brother Jacob. You tried desperately to bring your family with you.

When you immigrated to America, with the help of Hebrew Union College, you desperately tried to bring over family, friends, and colleagues. You were amazed at how little the American Jewish community was doing to help their fellow Jews. This brought you great frustration and remained with you throughout your time in America. Why didn't the Jewish community do more? Why were they not taking action and responsibility?

The Holocaust and the destruction of Eastern European culture brought your great sorrow and loneliness. Most of your family was murdered and your entire Eastern European Jewish culture was destroyed. Never again, you thought, will I stand idly by. Few are guilty, but all are responsible.

*You spent the next decade writing some of the most important contributions to Jewish text in the 20th century, *Man is not Alone*, *The Sabbath*, *God in Search of Man*, and *Man's Quest for God*. Many of these texts discuss the idea of **Divine Pathos**, and the need for humanity to be active in God's world. This was something you profoundly believed. You wrote, "**To be is to stand for, and what human beings stand for is the great mystery of being God's partner. God is in need of human beings.**"*

When you famously gave an elegy on this culture, everyone stood up at the end and recited Kaddish. You became the Jewish voice of this generation.

You began to revisit your thesis on Prophecy and were hoping to turn it into a book in English. This work inspires you and encourages you to be a leader in the world of social justice.

Activity - Prophet Shopping: Around the room, there will be a variety of text coming from prophets. Participants will take their time reading through the verses. They will then collect text that is meaningful to them and make protest signs. **See below for text.**

Narrator continues, *While two decades have passed since the Holocaust and the destruction of your childhood, the pain and memory has always stuck with you. The anger that the world didn't do enough inspired you to take action on causes that you felt were unjust. You published "The Prophets" in America with the hope that it would inspire and encourage Americans to take up the unjust causes of their time, Civil Rights, the war in Vietnam, equality for all. If there was suffering in the world, you needed to be involved.*

You first met Martin Luther King Jr. at the Chicago Conference on Race and Religion in 1963. At this conference, you famously addressed the crowd the following words:

"At the first conference on religion and race, the main participants were Pharaoh and Moses. Moses' words were: "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, let My people go that they may

celebrate a feast to Me.” While Pharaoh retorted: “Who is the Lord, that I should heed this voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and moreover I will not let Israel go.” The outcome of that summit meeting has not come to an end. Pharaoh is not ready to capitulate. The exodus began, but is far from having been completed. In fact, it was easier for the children of Israel to cross the Red Sea than for a Negro to cross certain university campuses. Let us dodge no issues. Let us yield no inch to bigotry, let us make no compromise with callousness.”

You, like Martin Luther King, invoked the story of Egypt and the Exodus as your call to action. You joined protests and marches to fight for civil rights. You grew close with Martin Luther King and had mutual respect and admiration for one another. You were proud that you were representing the Jewish people, but disappointed that more did not join. You joined the march in Selma, Alabama, marching at the front lines with Dr. King. **(In this moment, instruct the participants to stand up and march with you - holding up their protests signs).** As you walked, you were overcome with the power of that day. It was a religious experience. You remembered your experience with Nazi Germany, when you wish people would have marched then. You remembered how little the Jewish American community did, and hope they will feel inspired by your actions. You thought of the prophets and hoped you were living up to the spirit they invoked. And you thought of God and your call to be active in God’s world. You felt as if your feet were praying. You wrote later that evening:

“I thought of having walked with Hasidic rabbis on various occasions. I felt a sense of the Holy in what I was doing. Dr. King expressed several times to me his appreciation. He said, “I cannot tell you how much your presence means to us. You cannot imagine how often reverend Vivian and I speak about you.” Dr. King said to me that this was the greatest day in his life and the most important civil rights demonstration... I felt again what I have been thinking about for years — that Jewish religious institutions have again missed a great opportunity, namely, to interpret a civil-rights movement in terms of Judaism. The vast number of Jews participating actively in it are totally unaware of what the movement means in terms of the prophetic traditions.”

You took it upon yourself to be a leading figure for this cause. Prior to meeting with the President, John F. Kennedy, you wrote the following telegram:

“TO PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY, THE WHITE HOUSE, JUNE 16, 1963. I look forward to privilege of being present at meeting tomorrow. Likelihood exists that Negro problem will be like the weather. Everybody talks about it but nobody does anything about it. Please demand of religious leaders personal involvement not just solemn declaration. We forfeit the right to worship God as long as we continue to humiliate Negroes. Church synagogues have failed. They must repent. Ask of religious leaders to call for national repentance and personal sacrifice. Let religious leaders donate one month’s salary toward fund for Negro housing and education. I propose that you Mr. President declare state of moral emergency. A Marshall plan for aid to Negroes is becoming a necessity. The hour calls for moral grandeur and spiritual audacity.”

Explain, Heschel lived a remarkable life and was always concerned with the moral fabric of humankind. His interest in the prophetic tradition and belief that the Prophets did not end in biblical times, helped to shape his mindset that perhaps he was carrying on that prophetic tradition. His experience with Nazi Europe and the lack of response from the American Jewish community brought him great disappointment and urged him to never miss an opportunity to speak out.

Discuss:

1. *What are your thoughts on the life of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel? How has he influenced you?*
2. *What events in your life have helped influence the issues you care most about?*
3. *What role does Judaism play in your desire to fight for social justice?*
4. *How will you be a prophet in 2018?*

Heschel and Prophecy text to be posted around the room:

“The prophet’s task is to convey a divine view, yet as a person he is a point of view. He speaks from the perspective of God as perceived from the perspective of his own situation. We must seek to understand not only the views he expounded but also the attitudes he embodied: his own position, feeling, response — not only what he said but also what he lived; the private, the intimate dimension of the world, the subjective side of the message.”

1. *How does Heschel view the role of the prophet?*
2. *How does the prophet interact with God and the world around them?*

“To us a single act of injustice — cheating in business, exploitation of the poor — is slight; to the prophets, a disaster. To us injustice is injurious to the welfare of the people; to the prophets it is a deathblow to existence: to us, an episode; to them, a catastrophe, a threat to the world. Their breathless impatience with injustice may strike us as hysteria. We ourselves witness continually acts of injustice, manifestations of hypocrisy, falsehood, outrage, misery, but we rarely grow indignant or overly excited. To the prophets even a minor injustice assumes cosmic proportions.”

1. *When have you acted like a prophet? When have you not?*
2. *What causes would inspire the prophet to come out in you?*

“Above all, the prophets remind us of the moral state of a people: Few are guilty, but all are responsible. If we admit that the individual is in some measure conditioned or affected by the spirit of society, an individual’s crime discloses society’s corruption. In a community not indifferent to suffering, uncompromisingly impatient with cruelty and falsehood, continually concerned for God and every man, crime would be infrequent rather than common.”

1. *What would the prophets say about the moral state of our people?*
2. *In what ways can we be more concerned for God and humankind?*

An analysis of prophetic utterances shows that the fundamental experience of the prophet is a fellowship with the feelings of God, a sympathy with the divine pathos, a communion with the divine consciousness which comes about through the prophet’s reflection of, or participation in, the divine pathos... Sympathy is the prophet’s answer to inspiration, the correlative to revelation.

1. *How do you understand the prophets relationship with God from this quote?*

**The more deeply immersed I became in the thinking of the prophets, the more powerfully it became clear to me what the lives of the prophets sought to convey: that morally speaking there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings.*

1. *What are the reasons you get involved in issues that are important to you?*
2. *How have Heschel’s understanding of the Prophets influenced you?*

Selected Prophet text

[Jeremiah 20:7-9](#)

O LORD, Thou hast enticed me, and I was enticed, Thou hast overcome me, and hast prevailed; I am become a laughing-stock all the day, Every one mocketh me. (8) For as often as I speak, I cry out, I cry: ‘Violence and spoil’; Because the word of the LORD is made A reproach unto me, and a derision, all the day. (9) And if I say: ‘I will not make mention of Him, Nor speak any more in His name’, Then there is in my heart as it were a burning fire Shut up in my bones, And I weary myself to hold it in, But cannot.

[Micah 6:8](#)

It hath been told thee, O man, what is good, And what the LORD doth require of thee: Only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.

[Zechariah 4:6](#)

Then he answered and spoke unto me, saying: 'This is the word of the LORD unto Zerubbabel, saying: Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit, saith the LORD of hosts.

[Amos 5:24](#)

But let justice well up as waters, And righteousness as a mighty stream.

[Isaiah 40:4-5](#)

Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; and the rugged shall be made level, and the rough places a plain; (5) And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.'

[Isaiah 2:4](#)

And He shall judge between the nations, And shall decide for many peoples; And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, And their spears into pruning hooks; Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, Neither shall they learn war any more.