

SPIRITUAL AUDACITY: *Abraham Heschel's Prophetic Role*

BY BARRY CASEY

In Martin Doblmeier's new documentary, *Spiritual Audacity: The Abraham Joshua Heschel Story*, Heschel emerges not only as the foremost interpreter of the Hebrew prophets in the twentieth century, but also as a prophet himself. With his cloud of white hair, his expressive eyes, and his rabbinic beard, he looks every inch a latter-day Micah bearing witness to walking humbly with justice in one hand and mercy in the other.

"Remember, in a free society some are guilty but all are responsible." Heschel's ringing words plunge us into the tumult of the civil rights struggle of the '60s, the protests against the Vietnam War, and the turnabout toward the Jews by the Catholic Church during Vatican II. Heschel plays a leading role in all three of these history-making social movements.

Doblmeier's documentary approach surfaces the

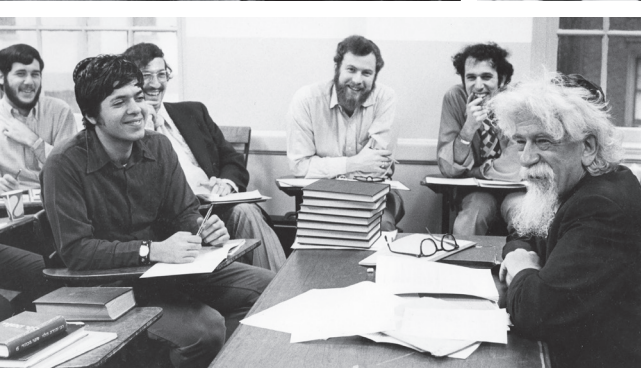


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Martin Doblmeier (left) interviews Pulitzer Prize winning historian Taylor Branch.

formation, the passion, and the legacy of his subjects. We learn about Heschel's birth in Warsaw, Poland in 1907, his family's long lineage of distinguished rabbis, his move to the University of Berlin at twenty to study philosophy

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Top left: Heschel at Hebrew Union College (© Susannah Heschel)
Left: Heschel teaching class at Jewish Theological Seminary (© Jewish Theological Seminary)
Above: Martin Luther King, Jr. with Heschel at Selma March, 1965 (© James Karales)

in 1927, and his deportation in 1938 at the hands of the Nazis. Although the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati brings him to America to teach in 1940, he is forced to leave his mother and his three sisters behind. They are exterminated in the Holocaust.

In 1945, Heschel leaves Hebrew Union College to join the faculty of the conservative Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City. He remains there for the rest of his career, even as his influence begins to extend far beyond the campus and the scholarly world.

In March of 1965, Martin Luther King, Jr. invites Heschel to march with him in Selma, Alabama. Many of the Black pastors in the movement had read *The Prophets*—King’s copy was underlined and annotated throughout—and, as Andrew Young says, “He was the authority on the prophets. But on this occasion, he was the prophet.”

Footage of the march shows Heschel on the front line with King, Andrew Young, Jesse Jackson, and John Lewis, his white hair and beard flowing. Despite the misgivings of local rabbis, Heschel marches in solidarity with hundreds of others, ready to face the brutality of the police.

His passion is to explore the nature of God’s deep compassion for humans and the extent to which God is

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As an introduction to Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Spiritual Audacity* is an inspiring and enjoyable guide. In just fifty-seven minutes, Martin Doblmeier's sensitive eye vividly portrays Heschel's Hasidic roots, his remarkable career, and most of all, his moral witness.

willing to partner with us for the cause of justice. For the prophets, says Heschel, injustice toward one person is injustice to everyone, a message that resonates deeply in the Black community.

Heschel's growing influence thrusts him into another controversy—the attempts within Vatican II to create a rapprochement with the Jews after centuries of hostility. When a conservative faction within the Vatican calls for the conversion of the Jews, Heschel is incensed. “They must understand,” he argues, “that I am willing to die for my faith.”

In an arc that entwines with that of Martin Luther King, Heschel grows increasingly critical of the war in Vietnam. “My father was not a pacifist,” says Susannah Heschel. “And he was not a communist sympathizer, by any means. But killing civilians—that was unacceptable.” Heschel asks, “How can I pray, knowing that I am co-responsible for the death of innocent people in Vietnam?”

In April 1967, at the Riverside Church in New York City, Martin Luther King, at Heschel's urging, makes a major statement against the war—and is roundly denounced by *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and other influential news sources. In an address following King's speech that Sunday, Heschel adds his own voice to the growing critique of the war by major religious figures. Susannah Heschel comments that, “My father wouldn't be quiet. No one could silence him.”

His final cause is to speak out for the Jews in Soviet Russia. Despite suffering a heart attack in 1969 that keeps him in the hospital for three months, Heschel is tireless in advocating for Soviet Jewry. It is exhausting. On a Friday night in December 1972, at the age of sixty-five, Heschel

dies at home. “To die in your sleep,” says Susannah Heschel, “especially on the Sabbath, is a kiss from God.”

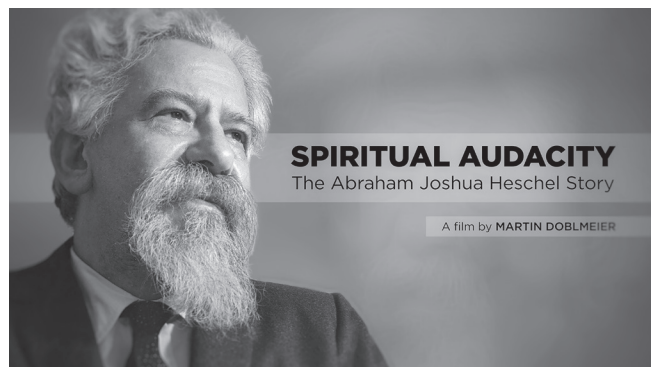
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Those familiar with Heschel's written works—*The Prophets*, *God in Search of Man*, *The Sabbath*, *Man is Not Alone*, and *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*—will appreciate seeing and hearing this passionate twentieth-century prophet, a witness for the awe and wonder that is faith in the living God.

Martin Doblmeier's documentary work includes films on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Reinhold Niebuhr, Howard Thurman, Dorothy Day and, familiar to readers of *Spectrum*, *The Adventists*, an award-winning film that portrays Adventists as some of the healthiest people on the planet.

Further Reading:

Dwyer, Bonnie. “Filmmaker Martin Doblmeier Talks About Forgiveness.” *Spectrum* website. May 12, 2008. <https://spectrummagazine.org/article/interviews/2008/05/13/filmmaker-martin-doblmeier-talks-about-forgiveness>



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