

“Recollection is a Holy Act”

Legacy and Memory in Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel’s Life and Death

1 hr Lesson

All Supplies	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Printouts of quotations (see below) 2. Printer Paper 3. Pens/Pencils 4. White board or flip chart 5. Markers (white board or regular) 6. Printouts of Rabbi Or Rose’s Timeline of Heschel’s Life (see appendix)
Lesson’s Essential Questions:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is the role of memory and legacy in the life of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, and in people’s reflections on him? 2. What is the relationship between Heschel’s life and influence, and the actions or values of Jewish leaders after him and into today?
Lesson’s Enduring Understanding:	Specific memories of home and family (in addition to the cultural concept of ‘memory’ itself) gave Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel a sense of meaning and connection. They also provided him with values that implicated his behavior in the present moment. Further, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel’s way of living his life, and his work embodied a living legacy that continues to shape Jewish leaders, theology, social justice commitments, and spiritual practice in America today.
Recommended reading in “My Legs Were Praying” by Rabbi Or N. Rose	This lesson can serve as a deeper dive into specific thematic elements of the book “My Legs Were Praying”. For use alongside the book, this lesson plan best aligns with themes highlighted in chapters 1-4, 6-10, 12-15, 17-18, and (especially) the “Memories from Heschel’s Students” section.

WARM UP:

Duration:	approx. 10 min.
Supplies:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. White Board or flip chart 2. Markers (white board or regular)
Directions:	<p>Invite students into a moment of connection to one another. Welcome students. Ask: “What is a favorite memory of a person in your life and why?”</p> <p>Solicit some sharing, popcorn style.</p> <p>Then, ask: “What is a favorite memory of a place you have and why?”</p> <p>Explain: today we’ll explore the role that memory plays in our lives, and how we want to be remembered by others.</p>

Transition to **writing the following** on the board and asking for students to write things they're wondering about the quote around it. Encourage them to also write comments on one another's.

"To remember is to carry responsibility." — AJH, *The Sabbath* (1951)

ACTIVITY 1: Exploring Heschel's Life

Duration:	10 min.
Supplies:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Printouts of R'Or Rose's Timeline of Heschel's Life (see appendix) 2. Pens/pencils
Directions:	<p>Pass out the timeline of Heschel's life. Explain brief bio highlights (Poland, Holocaust, U.S. life, civil rights, social justice) and frame his theology if short on time: Memory of the past → Responsibility for the present → Vision for the future.</p> <p>Invite students to read the timeline individually and make notes on it addressing the following questions: What do you notice? What is something you are wondering about?</p> <p>Come back together and reflect as a group.</p> <p>Ask: Who is this person? What are his values? What is animating his life?</p> <p>Explain that we're going to do a deeper collaborative exploration of Heschel's life so that we can be more grounded in the person we're exploring today, and to actually participate in the project of remembering his life and legacy.</p> <p>Divide the group into smaller study pairs/groups to do a deeper-dive into a few particular moments/eras on the timeline (educators decide and assign relevant chapter(s) of the book). For the fullest range, we recommend one group per decade/major era (approx. 6 groups total).**</p> <p>Come back together for reflection. Have each group share a bit about their particular moment/era. Ask: What new information did this deeper dive give you? What new insight has it provided into the question of who Heschel is, what his values are, and what animates his life?</p> <p>**If students are reading the book in full, this activity can also be done using fewer chapters, or spanning fewer decades of Heschel's life. The most important part is to have context for the arc of his life and work, with the ability to connect those varying stages and moments. Educators should decide what is best for their own goals and students.</p>

ACTIVITY 2: Quotation Walk Around & Reflections Project

Duration:	30 min.
Supplies:	1. Printouts of quotations (see below)
Directions:	<p>Transition from exploring his life to exploring his legacy.</p> <p>Distribute 4-5 quotes from Heschel about memory, or quotes from Heschel's students remembering him and his legacy. Quotation options are below, or can be found in the back of R'Or Rose's book in the section called "Memories from Heschel's Students."</p> <p>Explain that students will break up into study pairs (<i>chevruta</i>) to discuss the following prompts after reading the quotations.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Discussion Prompts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the role of memory in this text? Who is it for or about? • What emotions does the quote carry? Have you felt these emotions about remembering or memories before? If so, in what contexts? Why? • For texts about Heschel by others, how is Heschel's influence visible in this person's theology or Jewish leadership? How might it connect back to Heschel's own teachings? • How do these quotes portray memory or legacy differently than how you've encountered the idea before? • Where do you see the value of memory in your own life? Whose legacy lives in you or motivates you to act? <p>Quotations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "To us, recollection is a holy act; we sanctify the present by remembering the past. To us Jews, the essence of faith is memory. To believe is to remember." – AJH, <i>Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity</i>, ed. by his daughter Susanna Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1996), pg. 334. • "Remember that there is a meaning beyond absurdity. Build life as if it were a work of art...remember that life is a celebration" – AJH, <i>Eternal Lights</i>, 1972, Heschel's final interview • [For context: This quote is about Heschel's moral opposition to the United States government's policies during the Vietnam War. His perspective was very unpopular at the time.] "Our thoughts on Vietnam are sores, destroying our trust, ruining our most cherished commitments with burdens of shame. We are pierced to the core with pain, and it is our duty as citizens to say no to the subversiveness of our government, which is ruining the values we cherish. . . . The blood we shed in Vietnam makes a mockery of all our proclamations, dedications, celebrations. Has our conscience become a fossil, is all mercy gone? If mercy, the mother of humility, is still alive as a demand, how can we say yes to our bringing agony to that tormented country? We are here because our own integrity as human beings is decaying in the agony and merciless killing done in our name. In a free society, some are guilty and all are responsible. We are

here to call upon the governments of the United States as well as North Vietnam to stand still and to consider that no victory is worth the price of terror, which all parties commit in Vietnam, North and South. **Remember** that the blood of the innocent cries forever. Should that blood stop to cry, humanity would cease to be.” – **AJH**, (Text reprinted in Susannah Heschel, “Introduction” in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p. xxiv. See also Robert McAfee Brown, Abraham J. Heschel and Michael Novak, *Vietnam: Crisis of Conscience* (New York: Association Press, 1967).

- “When my father came back from marching in Selma, he said, ‘I felt my legs were praying. I felt something holy in the march, and it reminded me of walking with Hasidic rebbes in Europe.’ He was drawing from classical Hasidic teachings to say that every action of our lives can be transformed into prayer. My father writes, in *God in Search of Man*, that the mitzvot are prayers in the form of a deed. So the question is, How do you take something quotidian and transform it into a holy moment? That’s the question that Jewish texts ask over and over again. In my father’s book on the sabbath, he notes that in the Ten Commandments, we’re told to make the sabbath holy. It doesn’t come to us holy; we make it holy. So then there’s a challenge: How do we make a day holy? It’s a day—not a thing, a place, or something concrete. What does life consist of? Time. What do we do with the limited time that we have, with every moment or with the day? Is it possible to pause one day a week, and turn that day, that time—which is life itself—into a holy moment? So too with the march at Selma. How does a political gesture become a moment of prayer?” – **Susanna Heschel**, interview with “The Christian Century: Thoughtful, Independent, Progressive”, 2021.
- “Heschel taught me that God is not somewhere far away, but present in the trembling of our own hearts when we feel called to act.” — **Rabbi Sharon Brous**, sermon at IKAR (2018)
- “Heschel showed us that piety and prophecy belong together. He reminded us that a religious Jew must never choose between faith and conscience.” — **Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks**, *To Heal a Fractured World* (2005)
- “From Heschel I learned to bring the fervor of Hasidic prayer into the open spaces of American spiritual life.” — **Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi**, *Davening: A Guide to Meaningful Jewish Prayer* (2012)

CLOSING: How Do You Want to Be Remembered?

Duration:	10 min
Supplies:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Printer Paper 2. Pens/Pencils
Directions:	<p>Explain: We've now remembered Heschel's life and philosophy as important entities in and of themselves, and looked specifically at how Heschel thought about memory. We have also considered the ways that his life and philosophy live on (his legacy) and are recalled by others. With this context,</p> <p>Revisit the core questions as a group:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What role do memory and legacy play in Heschel's life and in how others reflect on him? 2. What is the relationship between Heschel's life and influence, and the actions or values of Jewish leaders after him and into today? <p>Give students a moment for individual reflection:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write down one "memory" or teaching of Heschel you want to carry. Write down one value that stood out to you, and one thing someone else said about him. • Now, write one way you want to be remembered by people in your life. Write at least one value you want to be known for, and at least one quality that you'd like people to attribute to you. Explain why those are the qualities or values you chose. • Finally, write one to three ways you can embody these commitments and values to be known in the way you wish to be. <p>Invite students to share anything that came up for them if they would like to. Thank them, and send them on their way.</p>

Appendix:

TIMELINE: ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL (from Rabbi Or Rose)

1907 – Born in Warsaw, Poland

1925 – Moves to Vilna for High School (Gymnasium)

1927 – Moves to Berlin for University & Rabbinic Studies (first ordained as a teen)

1933 – Publishes First Book: *God's Ineffable Name: Man* (Yiddish Poems)

1936 – Earns PhD from Humboldt University, Thesis on the Prophets

1938 – Deported by the Nazis from Frankfurt, Germany to Warsaw, Poland

1939 – Emigrates to the United States via London, England

1940 – Teaches at Hebrew Union College (Reform), Cincinnati, Ohio

1945 – Teaches at Jewish Theological Seminary of America (Conservative), NYC

1946 – Marries Sylvia Straus, Los Angeles

1950 – Publishes First Book in English: *The Earth Is the Lord's*

1952 – Sylvia Heschel gives birth to Susannah (Hannah Shoshanah) Heschel

1952 – Publishes *God in Search of Man*

1962 – Publishes *The Prophets* (expansion of doctoral dissertation)

1963 – Speaks at Conference on Race and Religion, where he first meets MLK;

Serves as Jewish Advisor to The Second Vatican Council (Catholic Church)

1965 – Marches for African American Voting Rights, Selma-Montgomery, Alabama

1966 – Helps Establish CALCAV, Anti-Vietnam War Organization

1972 – Dies at the age sixty-five