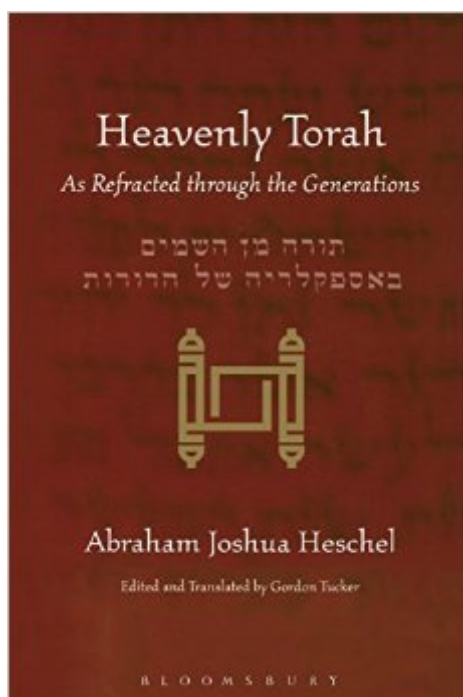


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Heavenly Torah: As Refracted Through The Generations



Synopsis

Known most widely for his role in the civil rights and peace movements of the 1960s, Abraham Joshua Heschel made major scholarly contributions to the fields of biblical studies, rabbinics, medieval Jewish philosophy, Hasidism, and mysticism. Yet his most ambitious scholarly achievement, his three-volume study of Rabbinic Judaism, is only now appearing in English. Heschel's great insight is that the world of rabbinic thought can be divided into two types or schools, those of Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael, and that the historic disputes between the two are based on fundamental differences over the nature of revelation and religion. Furthermore, this disagreement constitutes a basic and necessary ongoing polarity within Judaism between immanence and transcendence, mysticism and rationalism, neo-Platonism and Aristotelianism. Heschel then goes on to show how these two fundamental theologies of revelation may be used to interpret a great number of topics central to Judaism.

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Customer Reviews

This classic work by A. J. Heschel was originally only available in three Hebrew volumes (1962, 1965, Soncino Press, and a post-humous 1992 JTS Press volume.) It is an original and well researched study of classical rabbinic theology, exploring the views of the rabbis in the Mishnah and Talmud about the nature of Torah, the revelation of God to mankind, prophecy, and the ways that Jews have used scriptural exegesis to expand and understand these core Jewish texts. Heschel sees the ideas of second century sages Rabbis Akiva and Ishmael as paradigms for the two dominant worldviews in Jewish theology. According to professor Or N. Rose, "Akiva is characterized

as an esoteric thinker, who believes that every marking in the text of the Torah...is fraught with meaning. Through his imaginative and poetic readings of the Bible, Akiva develops a theology of immanence, believing that God is actively involved in creation and that He longs to be in relationship with human beings, identifying so closely with them that He actually participates in their joy and sorrow (God in Search of Man is the title of Heschel's major work of constructive theology). In contrast, Ishmael is depicted as a more austere rational thinker, who believes that the Torah was written in the "language of human beings," and that one need not engage in fanciful exegetical play to understand its teachings. Theologically, Ishmael speaks of a God of transcendence: a divine being who reigns from above and who requires nothing of His creations. For Ishmael, the notion that God is affected by human action violates his understanding of divine perfection. In his view, Torah is a heavenly gift given to humanity so that they might learn something of God's mysterious ways."Prof.

The methodology of Rabbi Akiva and how Rabbi Ishmael differed from him is masterly told in the classic *Torah Min Hashamayim*, by Abraham Joshua Heschel, which was translated into English by Gordon Tucker as *Heavenly Torah: As Refracted Through the Generations*. Two Talmudic sages around 130 CE, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael, disagreed on how to interpret the Bible. Rabbi Akiva won out, and Rashi, Nachmanides, and most ancient Bible commentators as well as most Midrashim follow his view. Others, such as Rashi's grandson Rashbam and Maimonides interpret the Torah as Rabbi Ishmael. Rabbi Akiva felt that since the Bible is a word for word revelation from God, and since God is perfect, is able to say concisely exactly what is meant to be said, and would never place any superfluous or non-relevant material in the divine book, whenever an idea is repeated in the Bible or there is an unusual word or spelling, God must have placed it to teach a lesson. People need to spot these additions and changes, Rabbi Akiva said, and figure out what God meant to teach by placing them in the Bible. Rabbi Ishmael disagreed. He felt that the Torah [which is intended for humans] speaks in human language. For example, just as people repeat themselves for emphasis, to gain attention, for the sake of clarity, or to make their statement more flowery or poetic, so too does the Torah. Nothing should be read into repetitions, of which there are many. If God meant to teach an additional lesson, God wouldn't have hidden it in a repetition that doesn't mean or even imply what people read into it; God would have made an explicit statement.

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