

Divine Pathos and Human Being - The Theology of Abraham Joshua
Heschel by Michael A Chester.
Valentine Mitchell 2005.

Abraham Joshua Heschel is an iconic figure to many modern Jews, and a key theologian and social activist for many Christians, notably in America. Dr Michael Chester, a Methodist minister, first encountered Heschel - and Jews and Judaism - while on a study programme in Saskatoon, and on his return to Britain began to build up a library of Heschel's publications.

Divine Pathos and Human being is a tribute to the multi-faceted genius that was Heschel, and also an expression of the author's admiration for and love of his subject. Heschel's philosophy can sometimes be highly challenging to readers, and occasionally opaque, but while the complexity of the man is apparent from the highly readable biographical parts of the book the author commendably presents Heschel's thought in a way that is approachable to anyone.

The book is divided into four main chapters: Abraham Joshua Heschel 1907-1972, Poetry, Rhetoric, Philosophy or Theology, The Divine Pathos and Human Being and The Impact of Heschel. Each chapter has copious notes and there is an excellent Glossary - albeit with one or two tiny mistakes - and a comprehensive list of further reading material.

Heschel was a scion of an eminent European Hassidic family with an amazing brain that was recognised at a very early age. An interest in secular studies took him away from the closed world of Hassidism which, had he remained in it, would probably have resulted in his death in the Shoah. Studies in Germany, which included Rabbinic Ordination from the Reform Hochschule led, indirectly, to his opportunity to escape from Nazism.

Following an invitation from the President of Hebrew Union College (HUC) in New York to become a Research Fellow, Heschel secured a visa to leave Germany, arriving first in London and months later in America where he was to spend the rest of his life. The Liberal ideology of HUC was not comfortable for Heschel however and he grasped with alacrity the opportunity to join the faculty of the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1945, where he taught until his death.

Heschel's writing was sustained if not exceptionally prolific, but the depth and quality of his output was outstanding. Chester pays eloquent tribute to it as well as elucidating some of the key areas of Heschel's work, notably with regard to Divine Pathos.

But it was another dimension of Heschel that made him extra special. He was not an ivory tower academic or philosopher, he believed in action.

It was Heschel who marched with Martin Luther King in the Civil Rights March in Selma, Alabama, Heschel who was an outspoken critic of the Vietnam War and Heschel who built the strongest possible connection with sections of the Christian communion in the USA.

Divine Pathos and Human Being is a wonderful introduction to a man whose thought and action defined him, and who set high benchmarks for his own and others' behaviour. It is an inspirational read about an inspirational life.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh