

## CHANGE OF HEART

By Esti Ahronovitz Haaretz 10 02 2012

Dror Bondi grew up on a settlement, demonstrated against Yitzhak Rabin and even thought of killing him. But after the assassination, he began searching for another way - and found it in the teachings of an American rabbi.

The Ein Prat Seminary is hidden in a mountainous desert landscape in the community of Allon, in the Judean Desert over the Green Line, north of the Jerusalem-Dead Sea highway. Young people - men and women, secular and religious - come here after their military service to study Bible, Talmud and Western philosophy. Here, in this scenic setting, Dror Bondi also introduces his pupils to the life and work of Abraham Joshua Heschel. In a side classroom, in conversation with Bondi - who calls himself "a Heschel disciple" - we plunge into Heschel's world of Warsaw and Berlin in the 1930s and his writings from New York in the 1950s and '60s. Then we jump to the Shavei Shomron settlement, where Dror Bondi grew up, never missing a demonstration against Yitzhak Rabin - until he was deeply shaken by the assassination. And now here we are, at the Ein Prat Seminary, in front of a group of twenty-somethings who are thirsty for knowledge that will remove the barriers dividing Israeli society.

Many American Jews consider Heschel a great theologian and one of the major Jewish philosophers of the 20th century, one who represents an open-minded Judaism combined with political activism and social involvement. He was one of the most prominent Jewish figures to support the civil rights struggle led by Dr. Martin Luther King, and to protest the Vietnam War. Heschel, whose mother and sisters were murdered by the Nazis, conducted a dialogue with the Christian world and took an active part in the meetings of the Second Vatican Council in 1963, where he delivered one of his most famous speeches ("No religion is an island" ) and helped bring about a revolution in the Church's attitude toward Judaism. The Council rejected the charge that Jews as a whole were responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus and called for a cessation of missionary activity to convert Jews. But this social activist and champion of interfaith dialogue, whose philosophy is so relevant in this country, is hardly known in Israel.

Bondi, 35, is writing a doctorate on Heschel's interpretive approach and has published a book, in Hebrew, about Heschel ("Where Art Thou? God's Question and the Translation of Tradition in the Thought of Abraham Joshua Heschel" ). Bondi also recently published a selection of Heschel's speeches and writings that he edited and translated into Hebrew ("God Believes in Man: Abraham Joshua Heschel's Judaism, Zionism and Social Justice" ).

Why is Heschel so unknown in Israel?

Bondi: "He's not known in Israel because here another God rules. A God we all believe in and deny. He has black clothing, a long white beard, he holds a book with small print, waves an Israeli flag up high. When Heschel speaks in the name of God, the secular person says, 'That's not for me, that's for the religious folks.' And the religious say, 'That's not my God.' In Israeli society, we're trying to solve our problems by means of the status quo. The religious have God, the secular have reality. Heschel upsets all that. He's not proposing religious liberalism or something milder than that. He wants to bring back God. The God who has died."

## Man is not alone

Abraham Joshua Heschel was born in Warsaw in 1907 to a distinguished Hasidic family. "Nearly all of the great Hasidic leaders of Eastern Europe, those who inspired and led the pietistic revival that began in the 18th century, were among my father's ancestors," writes Heschel's daughter, Susannah Heschel, a leading Jewish feminist scholar in the United States, in a chapter for the book. As a teenager, he began reading secular literature. "He said his mother worried, not hearing him chant Gemara while he studied, knowing that he was reading what he should not," says his daughter.

"Heschel was born to be a Hasidic rabbi," says Bondi. "His father, grandfather - going seven generations back, they were all great rabbis. That's how he was raised. He was ordained for the rabbinate at age 15. He was also supposed to get married at 15. It's unclear just how the match with his cousin ended up being called off, but this propelled him into the world of the Enlightenment. He cut off his sidecurls, took off his skullcap and studied philosophy and Judaism in Berlin. He was on and off, searching to find his way. In Berlin he studied philosophy at the university, but went to pray with the Boyan Hasidim."

Not long after Hitler came to power, Heschel passed his orals for his doctorate at the University of Berlin. His dissertation was on the biblical prophets. After completing his studies, he continued living in Berlin and taught at the Higher Institute for Jewish Studies. He lectured to Jewish groups throughout Germany and began to gain recognition from scholars and intellectuals.

Heschel became friendly with Martin Buber, who offered him a job as director of the Lehrhaus in Frankfurt, an experimental center for adult education. In October 1938, Jews with Polish citizenship who were living in Germany were arrested and immediately deported. Heschel was one of them, and spent three days standing in a cramped train car taking him back to Poland.

After his expulsion from Germany, Heschel made great efforts to flee Europe. On the basis of his publications and his reputation, he was able to obtain an entry visa for the United States. In April 1939, he left Germany for England, and traveled from there to America; his mother and three sisters remained in Poland. His sister Esther was killed on the day the Nazis invaded Poland. His sister Dvora was sent to Auschwitz, where she was killed on the day she arrived. His mother and his sister Gittel were killed at Treblinka. Heschel never returned to Germany or Poland.

He arrived in New York in March and began work as a lecturer at the University of Cincinnati. "Those were long, lonely years," says Bondi. "For 10 years, he taught English and hardly published anything significant. In the first years he was consumed with worry for his mother and three sisters who were left behind." In Cincinnati, Heschel met the concert pianist Sylvia Straus and fell in love with her. They each moved to New York separately and married there in 1946. Heschel wrote most of his important books during the first years of their marriage. His daughter writes that they seemed to just flow from him. His first book of philosophy, "Man is Not Alone," marked him as a prominent theologian. "And his keenest fans were actually the Protestant leaders in America," says Bondi. Throughout his life, Heschel remained deeply conscious of his Hasidic heritage. He sought to live his life with the idea that religious identity is first and foremost a matter of social sensitivity. In 1963, he met Martin

Luther King for the first time and became active in the Civil Rights Movement. A famous photograph shows King leading a civil rights march in Alabama in 1965; marching beside him is Heschel.

In April 1968, Heschel invited King to join his family for the Passover Seder. "We were expecting him to join us for the holiday," says Heschel's daughter. A few days before the holiday, Martin Luther King was assassinated. Heschel went on to found one of the movements opposed to America's involvement in the Vietnam War. He spoke at universities, synagogues, rallies and demonstrations, denouncing the killing that was going on in Vietnam. "In a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible," he insisted.

In his social activist years, he formed close relationships with many Christian leaders and with leading Catholic theologians. He was invited to speak at Catholic colleges and his writings continue to be read as spiritual sources.

Bondi says that to Heschel, God is not a religious or halakhic concept: "Heschel asks - What is the difference between God and a god? A Lord who is yours and not mine is a god, is idol worship. If my religious basis leads me to hatred, I should know that I am engaging in idol worship. God has to open us up to absolute caring and empathy for others."

#### A different spirit

On what basis do we people of different religious commitments meet one another? First and foremost we meet as human beings who have so much in common: a heart, a face, a voice, the presence of a soul, fears, hope, the ability to trust, a capacity for compassion and understanding, the kinship of being human. My first task in every encounter is to comprehend the personhood of the human being I face, to sense the kinship of being human, solidarity of being. (from Heschel's lecture "No Religion is an Island" )

Dror Bondi is married to Iris, a social worker, and they have four children. They live in the Beit Yisrael "urban kibbutz," a Jerusalem community with secular and religious members. "I try to live as a disciple of Heschel," he says. "Beit Yisrael is a community and a place that is close to Heschel's spirit, because what breaks down the barriers there is God, or social concern."

He came to this urban kibbutz a decade ago ("when there were still druggies lying around on the sidewalks" ), following his wife. "We have 55 families; it's a mixed group that frees itself from secular and religious definitions by means of joint social activism. I live in an Amidar [public housing] apartment. There's involvement in the neighborhood, in social projects, especially with children and teens. It's a spirit of Hasidism that's been forgotten, and on the urban kibbutz, it's continuing to bloom."

Bondi became aware of Heschel's thought during his time at university, after several years of crisis and searching after the Rabin assassination. He grew up in a religious-Zionist family. His mother, Rivka, is from a religious kibbutz, Tirat Zvi. Her parents, of Hasidic lineage, came to Israel in the early 1930s and were among the kibbutz founders. His father, Haim, comes from a family that was prominent in Orthodox German Jewry.

"My parents wanted to continue the pioneering path of their parents and that's how they came to Gush Emunim. It was the new Zionism. They moved to Shavei Shomron, one of the first 12 settlements in Judea and Samaria, about two years

after it was founded. They lived in a trailer without doors or windows. There were 20 families there."

**A feeling of betrayal**

The first intifada started shortly after Bondi began elementary school. "The whole world turned upside down," he says. "In a sense, I am a child of the intifada. There were days when my father wouldn't repair the car windows because there was hardly any point. The windows would be shattered again on the next trip. At the time there were no bypass roads, and to drive to the nearest city we would go via the refugee camps of Tul Karm, or via Jenin. To get to my grandparents in Tirat Zvi, we would go via Nablus. We had an old Subaru station wagon and I remember myself, as a 10-year-old boy, the eldest child, sitting next to my father, with the M16 next to me. And having lots of rocks thrown at us on the road. On the last trip through Jenin, they threw a Molotov cocktail at our car. And my father, who's an insurance agent by trade, not Rambo, got out of the car and fired in the air."

Is it really possible to live like that? Nobody says - hey, hold on a minute?

"Not at our house. Paradoxically, the harder it got, the more my parents' idealism grew. The sense of mission won out. The right was in power then and we felt like we were at the forefront: We were putting our lives on the line for the sake of the Land of Israel and the Jewish people. We lived with a sharp internal contradiction, because amid the tough and violent reality, we were also a very middle-class and Israeli community. The core group that founded the yishuv was a Bnei Akiva group from Netanya, people from well-established families who became captivated with the idea of Gush Emunim. Basic life on the yishuv was very normal. On the wall in my room I had a picture of Rabbi Kook, and next to it a picture of the soccer players Eyal Berkovic and Reuven Attar. We led a very simple, Israeli life: Every home had a television, we loved Maccabi Tel Aviv, we were completely a part of the Israeli story. One of the first things I ever read was the sports section in the newspaper."

And then Rabin formed a government.

"When Rabin came to power, this contrast between inside and outside, which was possible up to then, broke down. I was in high school when Rabin came in and it was a major crisis. Because suddenly we were the obstacle to peace. Because suddenly, the victims who died for the Land of Israel [ideology] - to whom were they sacrificed? We felt a sense of betrayal. I did too. Rabin was our big enemy. I was at a lot of demonstrations. My mother spent two weeks in the tent in front of the prime minister's office, two weeks in a tent opposite the Kirya. We were there at all the demonstrations."

And did you hear the cries of "Death to Rabin"?

"You didn't have to hear the cries. There was a powerful consciousness then of the sanctity of the land. The sanctity of the land was our essence, our spirit. Our cries were desperate. And it wasn't only settlers. Half of Israeli society was in a sense of euphoria and the other half in despair. You didn't need cries of 'Death to Rabin' to understand it. Everyone, right and left, felt that it was all up to one man - Rabin. Everything was up to him. The strongest bumper sticker at the time was 'What Did You Do Today to Save the Country?'"

And you actually thought about doing it? Killing Rabin?

"I was in 11th grade and the thought did pass through my mind. That it was something that ought to be done. I didn't have the means, but 'What did you do to save the country?' I put it out of my head, though, because my father always said, 'Do what is right and honest.'"

On the night of the 1995 peace rally in Tel Aviv, at the end of which Rabin was killed, the Bondi family was at home in Shavei Shomron, trying to watch a video of the movie "Fried Green Tomatoes," but the VCR stopped working. So they switched back to watching TV and saw the momentous news. "When Rabin was assassinated the whole country was in shock," he says. "And I was in shock because I wasn't in shock. It was like: Didn't you all see it coming? Wasn't it obvious that things were headed this way? What do you mean, 'How could this happen?' The mutual hatred and alienation between the different camps led to this."

The day after the assassination, he found himself going to Rabin's funeral. "It was intuition and desire," he says. "I remember being at the central bus station, trying to board the crammed buses that were going to the funeral. I basically wanted to be swallowed up again in Israeli society. I wanted to go back to being a part of the society. When Rabin was killed I realized that I had to rethink everything, that something was wrong here."

Not long after the assassination, Bondi began studying at the Ma'aleh Adumim hesder yeshiva and that is where he says he was exposed to general philosophy through reading the works of Rabbi Kook. He was searching for answers and became close to Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (known as Harav Shagar ) and his students at the Siah Yitzhak Yeshiva in Efrat.

"Harav Shagar, the outsider of Judaism, spoke about kabbala, Hasidism, mysticism, postmodern thought, Talmud and biblical criticism. And I was drawn to him in my attempt to rethink things. Under his influence and that of his students I developed critical postmodern thought toward everything: Judaism, halakha (Jewish law ), the beliefs of Judaism. The whole ideology. Criticism breaks down definitions. Definitions are illusions."

Was there a change in your political positions, too?

I would say that I became a leftist. But I got fed up with the left-right discourse. The change was on a deeper level. I understood that we had to get to a totally different place. Harav Shagar left me with questions."

At 23, Bondi joined his father in the family business, an insurance agency in Haifa. He was looking for stability and for two years he immersed himself in work and in part-time studies at Bar-Ilan University. "I needed a break from the spirituality and the questioning," he says. "I felt like it was leading me to despair. I turned off the light. I didn't break any of the 'negative' commandments, but I wasn't so strict about the 'positive' ones. I started studying Jewish philosophy once a week at Bar-Ilan and that's where I met my wife."

While studying for his master's degree and working as a high school teacher, he took a course comparing Heschel and Buber. "And I didn't relate to Heschel at all at that point," he says. "When I had to do a paper on him, I thought I'll just do something and get it over with, but then I started to really read him, and I was captivated."

A closed club

Heschel talks about accepting the other, accepting those who are different. Many people feel there is a contradiction between human rights and Jewish law. How does he reconcile this?

"The two cornerstones of Heschel's thought are built upon the Hasidic home in which he grew up, and the Nazis' rise to power. The 'Israeli' story of the Holocaust is 'They murdered us, we have to defend ourselves, and so we founded the state of Israel.' Heschel's story is different. Heschel says: 'We, the people of the West, murdered six million Jews. The culture in which I live gave rise to Hitler - and who am I? I am part of it.' When he came to America he was in shock, because he saw that treatment of blacks in the south then was worse than the Germans' treatment of the Jews. He taught at university and blacks in the south couldn't go. He asked himself: 'What's happening to the West? How can the West be healed?' Heschel experienced a great crisis of his Westernism. And out of that grew the understanding that Judaism must be translated into a universal language that will prevent the next Holocaust. His challenge was to repair the West by means of a profound Jewish spirit."

You are publishing a book of Heschel's writings, of the man who fought for equal rights in America, at a time when Israeli culture is in uproar over the exclusion of women. Do you think you can change extremists' minds?

"We don't need to reach the extremists, but rather to change the dichotomous dialogue in the center. The extremists only reflect to us who we are. We are on the same spectrum with them. The Baal Shem Tov said that if you see something negative happening in front of your eyes, you're seeing it because it's a part of you. And the question is how to fix it. The way to do that is through involvement and understanding that I am part of the story.

"I ask myself: Where do I exclude women? Where do I exclude others in general? Where do I make separations? We define ourselves by means of negating the other, and this is the problem. Israeli society is criticizing these instances of the exclusion of women from the point of view of a Western society - it's not legal, it's not liberal or fair. Heschel criticizes these things from a religious point of view: He says - There is no fear of God in this. We don't have God."

And how are you accepted in religious society?

"It's easier for secular people to hear than it is for religious people. Often when I meet religious people, I get the feeling that they find Heschel threatening. There's an initial apprehension. I hope it will get through to them, though, because Heschel expresses what we've managed to forget. I have hope that Heschel will free them from so-called 'religious society.'"

Bondi says he has trouble with the Israeli definition of the word 'religious.' "In English, when you say 'religious' you mean someone who has a connection with God in some way. In Israel a 'religious' person is someone who belongs to a sector that observes halakha. We've crowned halakha as the new god. This was a posttraumatic Haredi reaction, after the Enlightenment, after the Holocaust - come, let's focus on halakha. But it's not Jewish."

What is religiosity then, according to Heschel?

"According to Heschel, it's a consciousness of God who is conscious of Man," explains Bondi. "Most philosophers talk about the religious moment as a moment of yearning, of their humanity coming through. Heschel says it's the opposite moment, it's the moment when Man experiences a God that is seeking

him. Heschel also talks about the mystery one feels at a religious moment. "We can ignore the mystery but we cannot deny it or escape it."

Bondi explains that it's a little like falling in love. "Heschel says there are situations in life when something happens between one person and another person, where I am not in control though I am part of the encounter. God is more than this. It's the meaning beyond the mystery. The difference between god and mystery is like that between falling in love and love. When I fall in love I am out of control and feel something toward someone else. In love, suddenly something happens between us. Suddenly I see myself through her eyes and she sees herself through my eyes. Heschel says no - God is relevant only if He turns to me, if I feel His caring for the world and for Nature."

I'm listening to you and asking myself - how is this so different from what a guru from the East would say? We all want to get to the same place, don't we?

"The story isn't Heschel. The story is whether Judaism has something to offer us, to offer the world, to offer Western civilization, something spiritual. Are we satisfied with this world or do we feel that it is leading us to alienation and hatred? Heschel tries to confront the Jewish sources - the Bible, the Talmud, Hasidism, and take from it a spirit that can try to change our lives here. Maybe Judaism is no longer relevant and this story is over, and all that's left of Judaism is nationhood and religion, which is a closed club in which Jews only worry about their own. But Judaism once used to try to break down the dichotomy of nation and religion. I open the paper on Saturday and it's all about politics and entertainment. But once we were a thinking people, a people propelled by spirit and intellect."

The Divine Presence

We forgot the pain, the suffering, the hurt, the anguish and the anxiety which preceded the rise of the state. We forgot the awful pangs of birth, the holiness of the deed, the dedication of the spirit, (from Heschel's "Israel: An Echo of Eternity")

Heschel came to Israel for the first time in 1957. Zalman Shazar, his childhood friend, invited him to the World Zionist Histadrut convention. Up to then, Zionism was not a big part of his philosophy or life, but the encounter with the young state had a major impact upon him. For a while he even considered making aliyah.

At the time of the Six-Day War Heschel was immersed in the civil rights struggle in America and in opposition to the Vietnam War. Bondi says that in the period preceding the war, Heschel shared the general feeling of fear for the fate of the Zionist enterprise. After the war he came on another visit, and in an essay published in his book "Israel: An Echo of Eternity," he wrote that Israel constitutes an ongoing revolution in both the concrete and spiritual realms. "He went to the Western Wall and there he felt the revelation of the Divine Presence," says Bondi. "He felt that the shekhina was speaking to him through the stones of the Wall. He talked about the feminine presence of God at the Wall. He had a kind of prophecy. It changed his understanding, and he formulated a new theory of the sanctity of the place."

Bondi says it can be compared to the place where we first fell in love: "What's really important is that which happens between us, and that's the sanctity of time. But we go there, to this place where we feel in love for the first time and we

tell our children - 'This is where it happened.' As if the stones absorbed what happened between us. Heschel says that the Land of Israel is saturated with the same caring from God."

And what was Heschel's view on the future of the territories?

"In 1977 his daughter writes about a book he wrote about Israel in 1969: 'I have no doubt that if my father had lived a few years after Likud came to power, he would have made his voice heard even more ... While religious Judaism displayed an increasing congruity with the political right, my father formulated a religious position for the political left.' Heschel also gave an impassioned speech after the war, which concluded with a call for peace negotiations. But to my mind, if Heschel is just labeled as another American rabbi who joins the Israeli left, then he's not important. What's different about him is that he doesn't fit into the division of left and right."

Bondi says: "In Israel, there's a racist attitude toward Palestinians, Arabs, to non-Jews in general. Such people receive unequal treatment. It's spiritual anti-Semitism. Zionism and the settlers did not view the Palestinians as a people or as a significant entity. In my family growing up, we were taught to treat Arabs as human beings, as individuals. When my friends all went to throw rocks at Palestinians, I didn't go. But I also grew up in a home where the sanctity of the Land of Israel was supreme. Today I think that one must be wary of other gods that replace belief in God. I identify with what Rabbi Menachem Froman said, that the dialogue has to be with Muslims."

And it doesn't bother you to work in a seminary that's located in a settlement?

"The Gilo neighborhood [in Jerusalem] where I live is also technically over the '67 lines. I'm trying to get out of this aggressive discourse of this is ours, or this is not ours. I don't feel ownership of the territory or theft of the territory. I think 'The Temple Mount is in our hands' is an awful line. If it's in our hands, then it's not the Temple Mount. The challenge is to get to a point where you're standing before God and not possessing Him."

Building a new mainstream

The Ein Prat Seminary is bursting with life. Yahel Eliahu from Jerusalem came here after serving in the air force. "I felt there were many holes in my education, because of the kind of secular education I had. Learning here opened up a totally different way of looking at my connection with God. We've had some amazing classes here. We've discovered that there's another option and another way of looking at things."

Ben Solomon from Givatayim says, "It makes you want to come and listen to the other side. I used to think there was an absolute truth; now I know there's a middle ground too. The 'anti-' gets removed. It's because of the atmosphere here and especially the studies on Heschel. Someone who comes here very leftist discovers that there is also truth on the right. Someone who is very much a socialist comes here and finds that there is also truth in capitalism. We are liberated from black-and-white thinking. I think that at the end of the process we won't change our social, political and religious outlook, but it will make us understand where the other side is coming from, and that's what's beautiful about it."

The students all live in trailers near the seminary. They prepare meals together and split the chores. The atmosphere is very youthful. They amuse themselves sometimes by posting humorous videos on YouTube.

The seminary was founded eight years ago by Micah Goodman, a scholar of Jewish philosophy and modern philosophy who lives in Kfar Adumim. The program started out modestly, with just five post-army students. This year there are two classes totaling 120 students, ages 20-30. The budget comes from donations and charitable funds from the United States, and from the Education Ministry. The subsidized tuition of NIS 1,400 per month includes room and board in the trailers surrounding the school.

"I've been teaching here for a few years," says Bondi. "This is the best place to examine ideas in Israeli society. The students here come for a few months to open their minds, to change their way of learning. We want them to learn out of desire and not for the sake of achievements. And, in this sense, the place is like a yeshiva. Here we remove the knowledge barriers that exist in Israeli society. Secular people are exposed here to the Jewish sources, and religious people are exposed to more Western sources. And they also encounter each other here on the personal level, one on one. We're building a new Israeli mainstream."

In the last years of his life, Heschel suffered repeated heart attacks. He died in his sleep 40 years ago, on Shabbat, the 19th of the Hebrew month of Tevet (December 23, 1972). In Jewish tradition, passing away in one's sleep, especially on Shabbat, is considered a mark of closeness to God. "His daughter says that the Vietnam War broke his heart," says Bondi. "He couldn't understand how a nation of freedom and liberty could become a killing machine. His last heart attack happened shortly after he visited a friend who was imprisoned for his antiwar activity. It was a very cold day and he didn't feel well. A few days later, on Saturday, he died in his bed. Michel Foucault said that the author dies when he writes something - that the text is no longer his. In Hasidism, they believe that when you learn Torah, the one whose commentary you are learning stands before you. When you study someone, then he's alive again."

Have you brought Heschel back to life?

"I'm trying."

Do you believe that something will change here?

"Heschel was once asked if he was an optimist, and he said: 'I am an optimist, contrary to rational judgment.'"

Green network

One of the two founders of the Heschel Center for Environmental Learning and Leadership, Dr. Jeremy Benstein, says that he begins each course with an explanation of how the institute got its name. "Everybody who comes here assumes that Heschel was a very rich Jew who donated a lot of money to us and that's why the institute is named for him." Benstein, 51, and Dr. Eilon Schwartz, 53, both immigrated to Israel from America in 1983. They founded the institute to promote "environmental thinking and leadership."

"The institute has an agenda that combines a healthy environment, a strong society and a democratic economy," says Benstein. "And the main objective is leadership training." The institute holds leadership courses and runs "The Green Network" □ an environmental-educational project being used in about 600 schools. And what does all this have to do with Heschel? "When we came up

with the idea of establishing a center that integrates and promotes an ethical, social, political and spiritual view of issues that can be described as environmental crises, we were inspired by Heschel's philosophy. Eilon and I grew up in the Conservative movement in the United States. We didn't know Heschel personally but we studied with his disciples and students, and of course we were familiar with his writings. The combination of spirituality and values, together with political and social involvement, really spoke to us. Heschel's works express an awe for Creation; he sought to renew our relationship with the world of Nature, and we are trying to do that."