
The
INSECURITY
of FREEDOM

by Abraham Joshua Heschel

Farrar, Straus & Giroux

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Library of Congress catalog card number 66-16293

First printing, 1966

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Designed by Carrie Makover

Published simultaneously in Canada
by Ambassador Books, Ltd., Toronto
Printed in the United States of America

at the price of being in the minority. It is inner freedom that gives man the strength to forgo security, the courage to remain lonely in the multitude.

Judaism is forever engaged in a bitter battle against man's deeply rooted belief in fatalism and its ensuing inertia in social, moral, and spiritual conditions. Abraham started in rebellion against his father and the gods of his time. His great distinction was not in being loyal and conforming, but in defying and initiating. He was loved by the Lord not for ancestral worship but because he taught his descendants to "keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right" (Genesis 18:19).

III

We all share a supreme devotion to the hard-won freedoms of the American people. Yet to be worthy of retaining our freedoms we must not lose our understanding of the essential nature of freedom. Freedom means more than mere emancipation. It is primarily freedom of conscience, bound up with inner allegiance. The danger begins when freedom is thought to consist in the fact that "I can act as I desire." This definition not only overlooks the compulsions which often lie behind our desires; it reveals the tragic truth that freedom may develop within itself the seed of its own destruction. The will is not an ultimate and isolated entity, but determined by motives beyond its own control. *To be* what one wants to be is also not freedom, since the wishes of the ego are largely determined by external factors.

Freedom is not a principle of uncertainty, the ability to act without a motive. Such action would be chaotic and subrational, rather than free.

Although political and social freedom must include all this, even the freedom to err—its true essence is in man's ability to surpass himself, even to act against his inclinations and in defiance of his own needs and desires, to sacrifice prejudice even if it *hurts*, to give up superstition even when it claims to be a doctrine.

Freedom is the liberation from the tyranny of the self-centered ego. It comes about in moments of transcending the self as an act of spiritual ecstasy, of stepping out of the confining framework of routine reflexive concern. Freedom presupposes *the capacity for sacrifice*.

Although all men are potentially free, it is our sacred duty to safeguard all those political, social, and intellectual conditions which will enable every man to bring about the concrete actualization of freedom which is the essential prerequisite of creative achievement.

The shock of radical amazement, the humility born in awe and reverence, the austere discipline of unremitting inquiry and self-criticism are acts of liberating man from the routine way of looking only at those features of experience which are similar and regular, and opening his soul to the unique and transcendent. This sensitivity to the novel and the unprecedented is the foundation of God-awareness and of the awareness of the preciousness of all beings. It leads from reflexive concern and the moral and spiritual isolation which is the result of egocentricity to a mode of responding to each new and unique experience in terms of broader considerations, wider interests, deeper appreciation and new, as yet unrealized values.

As the object of divine transitive concern *man is*; knowing himself to be the object of divine concern and responding through acts of his own transitive concern *he is free*.

The meaning of freedom is not exhausted by deliberation, decision, and responsibility, although it must include all this. The meaning of freedom presupposes an openness to transcendence, and man has to be *responsive* before he can become *responsible*.

For freedom is not an empty concept. Man is free to be free; he is not free in choosing to be a slave; he is free in doing good; he is not free in doing evil. To choose evil is to fail to be free. In choosing evil he is not free but determined by forces which are extraneous to the spirit. Free is he who has decided to act in agreement with the spirit that goes beyond all necessities.

Freedom is a challenge and a burden against which man often rebels. He is ready to abandon it, since it is full of contradiction and

continually under attack. Freedom can only endure as a vision, and loyalty to it is an act of faith.

There is no freedom without awe. We must cultivate many moments of silence to bring about one moment of expression. We must bear many burdens to have the strength to carry out one act of freedom.

Man's true fulfillment cannot be reached by the isolated individual, and his true good depends on communion with, and participation in, that which transcends him. Each challenge from beyond the person is unique, and each response must be new and creative. Freedom is an act of engagement of the self to the spirit, a spiritual event.

Loyalty to freedom means loyalty to the substance of freedom. But such loyalty must be actualized again and again. Here our way of living must change: it must open the sight of sublime horizons under which we live.

Refusal to delegate the power to make ultimate decisions to any human institution, derives its strength either from the awareness of one's mysterious dignity or from the awareness of one's ultimate responsibility. But that strength breaks down in the discovery that one is unable to make a significant choice. Progressive vulgarization of society may deprive man of his ability to appreciate the sublime burden of freedom. Like Esau he may be ready to sell his birthright for a pot of lentils.

A major root of freedom lies in the belief that man, every man, is too good to be the slave of another man. However, the dynamics of our society, the cheapening and trivialization of existence, continues to corrode that belief. The uniqueness and sacred preciousness of man is being refuted with an almost cruel consistency. I do not mean the anthropological problem whether or not we are descendants of the monkeys. What I have in mind is the fact that we are being treated as if there were little difference between man and monkey. Much that is being done, e.g., in the name of entertainment, is an insult to the soul. What is involved is not demoralization; much of it may be morally neutral. What is involved is dehumani-

zation; so much of it is a continual process of intellectual deprivation. Sensitivity to words is one of the many casualties in that process.

Words have become pretexts in the technique of evading the necessity of honest and genuine expression. Sometimes it seems as if we were all engaged in the process of liquidating the English language. But words are the vessels of the spirit. And when the vessels are broken, our relationship to the spirit becomes precarious (see "Prayer as Discipline," p. 259).

To be free one must attain a degree of independence. Yet the complexities of society have enmeshed contemporary man in a web of relationships which make his independence most precarious.

Inherent in man is the desire to be in agreement with others. Yet today with a mass of miscellaneous associations and unprecedented excitements, it is a grim task, indeed, to agree with all and to retain the balance of integrity.

Loaded with more vulnerable interests than he is able to protect, bursting with fears of being squeezed by a multiplicity of tasks and responsibilities, modern man feels too insecure to remain upright.

Good and evil have always had a tendency to live in promiscuity, but in more integrated societies man, it seems, found it easier to discriminate between the two, while in our turbulent times circumstances often stupefy our power of discernment; it is as if many of us have become value-blind in the epidemics of needs.

The glory of a free society lies not only in the consciousness of *my* right to be free, and *my* capacity to be free, but also in the realization of *my fellow man's* right to be free, and *his* capacity to be free. The issue we face is how to save man's belief in his capacity to be free. Our age may be characterized as the *age of suspicion*. It has become an axiom that the shortest way to the understanding of man is to suspect his motives. This seems to be the contemporary version of the Golden Rule: *Suspect thy neighbor as thyself*. Suspicion breeds suspicion. It creates a chain-reaction. Honesty is not necessarily an anachronism.

The righteous man shall live by his faith. Can he live by his

suspicion and be righteous? It is dangerous to take human freedom for granted, to regard it as a prerogative rather than as an obligation, as an ultimate fact rather than as an ultimate goal. It is the beginning of wisdom to be amazed at the fact of our being free.

Freedom is a gift which may be taken away from us. It is not an absolute but a relative possession, an opportunity. We are free only when living in attachment to the spirit.⁸ The blessings and opportunities of living in a free society must not make us blind to those aspects of our society which threaten our freedom: the tyranny of needs, the vulgarization of the spirit are a particular challenge.

The insecurity of freedom is a bitter fact of historical experience. In times of unemployment, vociferous demagogues are capable of leading the people into a state of mind in which they are ready to barter their freedom for any bargain. In times of prosperity hidden persuaders are capable of leading the same people into selling their conscience for success. Unless a person learns how to rise daily to a higher plane of living, to care for that which surpasses his immediate needs, will he in a moment of crisis insist upon loyalty to freedom?

The threat to freedom lies in the process of reducing human relations to a matter of fact. Human life is no longer a drama; it is a routine. Uniqueness is suppressed, repetitiveness prevails. We teach our students how to recognize the labels, not how to develop a taste. Standardization corrodes the sense of ultimate significance. Man to his own self becomes increasingly vapid, cheap, insignificant. Yet without the sense of ultimate significance and ultimate preciousness of one's own existence, freedom becomes a hollow phrase.

We are losing our capacity for freedom. New forces have emerged which regulate our actions. Modern man is not motivated anymore, he is being propelled; he does not strive anymore, he is being driven.

The principle of majority decision, the binding force of a majority, depends upon the assumption that the individuals who make up the majority are capable of discerning between right and wrong. But we are gradually led to believe that man is incapable of making a significant moral judgment.

We have made great contributions to the spiritual defamation of man. Far from eliminating the fear of man, our novels and theories depict man as untrustworthy, passion-ridden, self-seeking, and disingenuous.

Reverence for man has been strenuously refuted as sentimental eyewash. We all ride on the highways of debunking. There seems to be no question in our mind that there is no depth to virtue, no reality to integrity; that all we can do is to graft goodness upon selfishness, to use truth as a pragmatic pretext, and to relish self-indulgence in all values.

Contemporary man is told that his religious beliefs are nothing but attempts to satisfy subconscious wishes, that his conception of God is merely a projection of self-seeking emotions, an objectification of subjective needs; God is the Ego in disguise. We have not only forfeited faith; we have also lost faith in the meaning of faith. This tendency to question the genuineness of man's concern for God is a challenge more serious than the tendency to question God's existence.

One of the chief problems of contemporary man is the problem: What to do with time? Most of our life we spend time in order to gain space, namely things of space. Yet when the situation arrives in which no things of space may be gained, the average man is at a loss as to what to do with time.

With the development of automation the number of hours to be spent professionally will be considerably reduced. The four-day week may become a reality within this generation. The problem will arise: What to do with so much leisure time? The problem will be *too much* time rather than too little time. But too much time is a breeding ground for crime (see "To Grow in Wisdom," pp. 79 ff.).

The modern man has not only forgotten how to be alone; he finds it even difficult to be with his fellow man. He not only runs away from himself; he runs away from his family. To children, "Honor your father and your mother," is an irrational suggestion. The normal relationship is dull; deviation is where pleasure is found.

The modern man does not know how to stand still, how to appreciate a moment, an event for its own sake. When witnessing

an important event or confronted with a beautiful sight, all he does is take a picture. Perhaps this is what our religious traditions must teach the contemporary man: to stand still and to behold, to stand still and to hear.

Judaism claims that the way to nobility of the soul is the art of sanctifying time. Moral dedications, acts of worship, intellectual pursuits are means in the art of sanctification of time. Personal concern for justice in the market place, for integrity in public affairs and in public relations is a prerequisite for our right to pray.

Acts of worship counteract the trivialization of existence. Both involve the person, and give him a sense of living in ultimate relationships. Both of them are ways of teaching man how to stand alone and not be alone, of teaching man that God is a refuge, not a security.

But worship comes out of wisdom, out of insight, it is not an act of oversight. Learning, too, is a religious commandment. I do not mean the possession of learning, erudition; I mean the very act of study, of being involved in wisdom, and of being overwhelmed by the marvel and mystery of God's creation (see "Idols in the Temples," p. 57).

Religion's major effort must be to counteract the deflation of man, the trivialization of human existence. Our religious traditions claim that man is capable of sacrifice, discipline, of moral and spiritual exaltation, that every man is capable of an ultimate commitment.

Ultimate commitment includes the consciousness of being accountable for the acts we perform under freedom; the awareness that what we own we owe; the capacity for repentance; that a life without the service of God is a secret scandal.

Faith in God cannot be forced upon man. The issue is not only lack of faith but the vulgarization of faith, the misunderstanding and abuse of freedom. Our effort must involve a total reorientation about the nature of man and the world. And our hope lies in the certainty that all men are capable of sensing the wonder and mystery of existence, that all men have a capacity for reverence. Awe, reverence precedes faith; it is at the root of faith. We must grow in

awe in order to reach faith. We must be guided by awe to be worthy of faith. Awe is "the beginning and gateway of faith, the first precept of all, and upon it the whole world is established."

The grandeur and mystery of the world that surrounds us is not something which is perceptible only to the elect. All men are endowed with a sense of wonder, with a sense of mystery. But our system of education fails to develop it and the anti-intellectual climate of our civilization does much to suppress it. Mankind will not perish for lack of information; it may collapse for want of appreciation.

Education for reverence, the development of a sense of awe and mystery, is a prerequisite for the preservation of freedom.

We must learn how to bridle the outrageous presumption of modern man, to cultivate a sense of wonder and reverence, to develop an awareness that something is asked of man. Freedom is a burden that God has thrust upon man. Freedom is something we are responsible for. If we succeed, we will help in the redemption of the world; if we fail, we may be crushed by its abuse. Freedom as man's unlimited lordship is the climax of absurdity, and the central issue we face is man's false sense of sovereignty.

Tragic is the role of religion in contemporary society. The world is waiting to hear the Voice, and those who are called upon to utter the word are confused and weak in faith. "The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty" (Psalm 29:4). Where is its power? Where is its majesty?

A story is told about a community where a man was accused of having transgressed the Seventh Commandment. The leaders of the community went to the Rabbi and, voicing their strong moral indignation, demanded stern punishment of the sinner. Thereupon the Rabbi turned his face to the wall and said: "O, Lord, Thy glory is in heaven, Thy presence on earth is invisible, imperceptible. In contrast to Thy invisibility, the object of that man's passion stood before his eyes, full of beauty and enravishing his body and soul. How could I punish him?"

Rabbi Simon said: "When the Holy One, blessed be He, came to

create Adam, the ministering angels formed themselves into groups and parties, some of them saying, 'Let him be created,' whilst others urged, 'Let him not be created.' Thus it is written, Love and Truth fought together, Righteousness and Peace combatted each other (Psalm 85:11): Love said, 'Let him be created, because he will dispense acts of love'; Truth said, 'Let him not be created, because he is compounded of falsehood'; Righteousness said, 'Let him be created, because he will perform righteous deeds'; Peace said, 'Let him not be created because he is full of strife.' What did the Lord do? He took Truth and cast it to the ground. Said the ministering angels before the Holy One, blessed be He, 'Sovereign of the Universe! Why dost Thou despise Thy seal? Let Truth arise from the earth!' Hence it is written, Let truth spring up from the earth (Psalm 85:12)."⁴

God had to bury truth in order to create man.

How does one ever encounter the truth? The truth is underground, hidden from the eye. Its nature and man's condition are such that he can neither produce nor invent it. However, there is a way. If you bury the lies, truth will spring up. Upon the grave of the specious we encounter the valid. Much grave digging had to be done. The most fatal trap into which religious thinking may fall is *the equation of faith with expediency*. The genuine task of our traditions is to educate a sense for the expedient, a sensitivity to God's demand.

Perhaps we must begin by disclosing *the fallacy of absolute expediency*. God's voice may sound feeble to our conscience. Yet there is a divine cunning in history which seems to prove that the wages of absolute expediency is disaster. We must not tire of reminding the world that something is asked of man, of every man; that the value of charity is not to be measured in terms of public relations. Foreign aid, when offered to underdeveloped countries for the purpose of winning friends and influencing people, turns out to be a boomerang. Should we not learn how to detach expediency from charity? The great failure of American policy is not in public relations. The great failure is in private relations.

The spirit is a still small voice, and the masters of vulgarity use loudspeakers. The voice has been stifled, and many of us have lost faith in the possibility of a new perceptiveness.

Discredited is man's faith in his own integrity. We question man's power to sense any ultimate significance. We question the belief in the compatibility of existence with spirit.

Yet man is bound to break the chains of despair, to stand up against those who deny him the right and the strength to believe wholeheartedly. Ultimate truth may be hidden from man, yet the power to discern between the valid and the specious has not been taken from us.

Surely God will always receive a surprise of a handful of fools—who do not fail. There will always remain a spiritual underground where a few brave minds continue to fight. Yet our concern is not how to worship in the catacombs but rather how to remain human in the skyscrapers.

NOTES

1. Portions of this section are based on Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1951).

2. Portions of this section are based on Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), Chap. 1.

3. "The Torah says: 'The tables were the work of God and the writing was the writing of God, engraved upon the tablets' (Exodus 32:16). Read not *harut* (meaning 'engraved') but *herut* meaning freedom, for none can be considered free except those who occupy themselves with the study of the Torah" (*Aboth*, VI, 2).

4. "The seal of God is truth" (*Shabbat*, 55b).