Brooklyn, 1935. While Orthodoxy in North America was struggling for survival, one of its lone spiritual bastions, the Rabbi Chaim Berlin Yeshivah high school, had reached the brink of bankruptcy. In a heroic gesture, considering the economic straits of those Depression years, R. Yehoshua Heschel Rabinowitz, now of Brownsville, New York, had 2,500 copies of his commentary on the Passover Haggadah printed at his own expense, and donated the volumes to be offered as a holiday gift and fundraiser to wealthier members of the wider Jewish community. Todat Yehoshua is a slim, blue volume in traditional format: the text of the Haggadah in large square type face on the upper page with excurses in Hebrew Rashi-script below, interspersed with brief halakhic guidelines for conducting the seder.¹ On closer look, however, this unusual commentary opens a window onto worlds of experience.

A hasidic zaddik of illustrious lineage, R. Yehoshua Heschel Rabinowitz of Monastyrishche (1860-1938) had served for nearly forty years as itinerant religious leader of Jewish communities scattered through the Ukraine, during a period of upheaval and catastrophe that profoundly affected Jewish existence in Eastern Europe, from within and from without. In addition to his active role in public life as arbitrator, halakhic authority and preacher (darshan), R. Yehoshua Heschel wrote prolifically. His extant oeuvre includes seven homiletic-exegetical volumes, a family history, an autobiography, poetry, and an unpublished collection of personal letters. As a whole, these works reveal his extraordinary involvement – intellectual as well as emotional – in the crises that were challenging and transforming the traditional Jewish and Hasidic world: the rise of nationalism, emancipation and equal rights; Zionism and the linguistic renaissance of Hebrew; secularization and assimilation; political upheavals, anti-Semitic violence, mass emigration.

In the wake of the Revolution of 1917, the waves of pogroms, civil war and chaos that devastated Jewish life in the southern provinces of Russia (1919-1921), plagues of typhus, starvation and renewed persecutions with the rise of the Soviet regime, beset with tragic personal losses, he and his wife managed to emigrate in 1924 with their three surviving children and four grandchildren to the United States. His dream to settle in the Land of Israel remained unfulfilled. The last years of his life were devoted to North American Jewry.² Through his personal influence and his written works,

¹ Original publication, 1935; reprinted Jerusalem, 2001. R. Yehoshua Heschel borrowed some sections of the commentary from his work Nahalat yehoshua (still unpublished at the time), a collection of Hasidic homilies on the festivals based on sermons he had given in Jewish communities throughout the Ukraine over the years. As the author, then in his mid-seventies, explains in his introduction, he had been hit by a car a few months earlier while crossing the street and was severely injured. The move to publish his commentary on the Haggadah separately, and the title he gave it – literally “Yehoshua’s thanks” – are expressions of his gratitude for having been granted what he perceived as a miraculous recovery.

he sought to engender an active dialogue between Jewish tradition and contemporary Jewish life, to aid those around him in forging an authentic Jewish identity loyal to the past and empowered to rise to the challenges of modernity. This paper focuses on R. Yehoshua Heschel’s commentary on the Haggadah as emblematic of that overreaching personal agenda.

The Haggadah itself, seen against this historical and cultural background, truly is ideally suited to his project. At the Passover seder, families and communities gather to read the Haggadah. It is a central event in the Jewish religious year and one of the most tenacious ritual elements of Jewish culture. The implicit purpose of the seder, from the earliest stages of its invention, is to construct and preserve Jewish collective memory and historical consciousness. Composed of many textual layers and spoken in different voices, the Haggadah seeks to teach its readers about the past while addressing them directly in their immediate present. And so every Jew, ‘in each and every generation’ is meant to be involved, on the most intimate personal level, in the narrative being read: to ‘see oneself’ as if he or she had gone out of Egypt. Yet the Haggadah teaches in other, more oblique ways as well. The structure of the text is open, as any anthology is, with gaps and rough edges between its juxtaposed sources, and those loose spaces invite its readers to a responsive understanding. At the seder, we are enjoined to contemplate our own lives and to re-encounter the experience of redemption, both in a metaphorical and in an historical sense, by engaging creatively with the symbols and meanings contained in the traditional text. Written commentaries on the Haggadah, then, refract the concerns – social, political, psychological, existential – that their authors and readers share. In content and in means of expression, such commentaries bear cogent testimony to the specific human condition in which they were generated.

Formally, Todat yehoshua belongs to the genre of Hasidic homiletic literature, and to that extent represents a prime example of Hasidic exegetical creativity. In his commentary, R. Yehoshua Heschel models an engaged reading of a panoply of traditional texts, eclectically chosen and associatively interpreted, as he draws on a strikingly varied intellectual reservoir. While remaining attentive to the primary, commonly perceived meanings and language of his sources – aggadic and halakhic, mystical and rational, ancient and modern – he mediates between them and the concerns of his perceived contemporary audience. Concepts, images and textual fragments, loosened from their original literary context, are reintegrated into new rhetorical units while the author, as he writes, reflects on his own methods and goals.

The passages I cite from Todat yehoshua in this paper follow the narrative of the Haggadah itself and foreground some of his commentary’s central motifs. At the same time, each passage also

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Twersky, a descendant of R. David Twersky, the Tolner Rebbe as ‘the first “legitimate” Hasidic rebbe to settle in the United States,’ in 1912.

3 As a literary composition, Todat yehoshua stands outside the structures formulated by academics. It is not purpose-built, nor is it a collection of self-standing essays on Passover themes or an anthology of previously existing materials cobbled together on the scaffolding of the Haggadah. C.f., R. Yehoshua Heschel’s introduction to Todat Yehoshua: he used materials from previous works, added marginal notes with new insights while putting this work together; his comments give a clear sense of a dynamic process of creation, his living encounter with the texts.
touches on important issues that mark R. Yehoshua Heschel’s oeuvre as a whole, questions and themes to which he returned throughout his life. All in effect, are old-new core dilemmas, forever present: the existential trials of the Jewish people and the meaning of human suffering; Jews among the nations – anti-Semitism, humanistic values and social ethics; the importance of historical memory; the nature of faith; the enduring bond between God, Torah, and the Jewish people; the endless power of hope for redemption.

Memory: Linking Past to Future

The Pesach Haggadah recounts a process of transformation in which Jewish self-awareness is fundamentally altered. R. Yehoshua Heschel reads the state of exile, or galut, as the beginning point of a metamorphosis that will transform a seemingly random gathering of individuals to an enmeshed community. But for this to take place, there must be an awakening, the birth of a new dimension of awareness. This awakening is what made Exodus possible; ultimately, it is what engendered the entity called God’s chosen people, a nation worthy of being redeemed. In the opening pages of his commentary, R. Yehoshua Heschel examines the inner workings of that transformation and summons core hasidic concepts to bring it to light.

‘The people picked up its dough before it could rise’ (Ex. 12: 34). A prelude to the dramatic events to follow, this verse, narrated so briefly, represents the mitzvah of biur chametz, the injunction to take action, that ‘no leaven be found in your homes’ (Ex. 12: 19). Following the Zohar, R. Yehoshua Heschel reads it allegorically. ‘Dough’, in a mystical sense, symbolizes the body, material existence. This verse, then, attests that in that final hour they struggled to elevate themselves, to ‘pick up their dough’, their physicality, just before it was too late. But haste was essential, before the Other Side of evil had time to distract them with anxiety about themselves. In a moment of greatness, they attained the ultimate state of bitul hayesh – annulment of their earthly, embodied, human existence. What made this moment possible is the metaphysical, eternal bond between the Jewish people and God. The connection is primary, organic, indestructible. And so the Exodus, for all time to come, planted within the Jewish people the power to shrug off concern for the body and its pleasures, to forget (if only for a moment) what they lack, the pain and suffering of earthly life, to put aside egotism and selfishness. On this reading, the attainment of what Hasidic teaching calls hitpashtut ha-gashmiyut signifies a vital, founding stage in every spiritual journey toward freedom, from the historical Exodus to every private story of exile and hoped-for redemption.

Thus, urgency to ‘remember the day you left Egypt all the days of your life’, far more than a memory of historical past, reverberates into the present, into the psyche of every living Jew. R.

4 His reading al derekh ha-hasidut is based on a passage from Zohar 2 40b, which he notes.
5 Todat yehoshua (henceforth: TY) 15-16; 29. R. Yehoshua Heschel returns to this theme later in his commentary, pp. 96-99. See my discussion below, before n. 54.
Yehoshua Heschel describes the self-perception that the Haggadah seeks to cultivate. These lines from the first pages of his commentary resonate with contemporary relevance.⁶

[Remembering] is what ensures our survival throughout our wanderings, uprooted again and again, from one exile to the next. Wherever we go, we are persecuted and despised, scorned and demeaned by all. Yet we must not falter, must never believe that we are the lowest of nations. The day we left Egypt – this memory must imprint our consciousness, […] the great lengths to which God went to redeem us from there, to make us His treasured, unique nation.

This alone will guard us from being swallowed up by our surroundings, assimilated and lost in alien cultures; this alone empowers us to keep on hoping, never to despair that salvation is near.⁷

Paradoxically, centuries of Jewish existence amidst the nations ‘as a lamb among wolves’ is the most cogent testimony of God’s power on the stage of history. The striking prooftext of all this that R. Yehoshua Heschel offers is a theologically laden talmudic passage. The ominous, terror-striking eventuality of Divine occlusion – ‘I will hide My face on that day’ (Deut. 31:18) – is preempted by a second counter-narrative: ‘Rav Yosef said, His hand is outstretched, guarding over us, as it is written, “I have covered you in the shadow of My hand”’ (Isa. 51:16).⁸ The powerful images in the Haggadah of God’s ‘strong hand’ and ‘outstretched arm’ gesture to this complex reality. Although present-day ‘heretics’ continue to avow that ‘ours is the nation whose Master turned His face from it’, in truth, hester panim means just the opposite: it attests not to abandonment but to concealed, eternal Divine presence. ‘As the verse says, “While they are in the land of their enemies, even so, I shall never reject them utterly” (Lev. 27: 44). God’s “outstretched arm” bears witness to this promise, that the Face will not be hidden forever. His hand secretly shelters and protects us from annihilation in this exile; it buoys our hope that, in the end, God will return and comfort us.’⁹

Theologically speaking, this is convincing enough. Nonetheless, ‘heretics of our times’, in the guise of contemporary ideologies and political groups, still work tirelessly to undermine the tenets of traditional Jewish belief. The next section of the Haggadah, as if in response, reflects on the experiential power of memory:

Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah said, ‘I am like a man of seventy years, yet I could not prove that the Exodus must be mentioned at night until Ben Zoma explained it: “Remember the day you left Egypt all the days of your life” (Deut. 16: 3): ‘the days of your life’ refers to the days;

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⁷ TY 29-30.
⁸ B. Hagigah 5b. On the striking statement in that Talmudic passage that ‘whoever has not experienced hester panim is not one of them’ [the Jewish people] see TY, 37; compare his commentary on agadot ha-shas, Yalkut Yehoshua, 95.
⁹ ‘Heretics’ would avow that ‘ours is the nation whose Master turned His face from it’ (alluding to B. Hagigah 5b). TY 29-30.
A spontaneous associative leap, and R. Yehoshua Heschel moves to the eschatological plane, examining views of exile and visions of redemption (erroneous and true ones).\(^{10}\) Ben Zoma, cast in the passage above as master interpreter, appears again in the well-known talmudic tale of ‘the four who entered the mystical Orchard (pardes).’\(^{11}\) Read allegorically, the four Sages represent four worldviews – disparate, conflicting stances on a single, acute issue: ‘When will God redeem Israel? How, ultimately, will they be redeemed?’\(^{12}\) As the Talmud puts it, Ben Zoma ‘stole a glance and was harmed’. R. Yehoshua Heschel explains: Ben Zoma believed ardently that ‘good is concealed even in the depths of evil’ - \(^{13}\) But when confronted with the reality of absolute evil, devoid of the faintest spark of light, Ben Zoma was confounded, unable to integrate that truth with his pure, naïve vision: ‘Could it be that Israel, too, faces irrevocable punishment!?\(^{14}\) RYH responds: ‘Yet the story of the Exodus bears witness that this will never be. In their desperate, final hour, at the threshold of the fiftieth gate of impurity, God set the Jewish people free, did not allow them to be swallowed up by darkness, lost beyond return. This is the concealed, inner meaning of remembering the Exodus “in the night” – understand it well.’\(^{15}\)

R. Yehoshua Heschel reads the three other players in that famous talmudic scenario as spokesmen for other stances on Jewish historical destiny. Ben Azai – reclusive, a-political, abstinent (parush), consumed by holiness – chose death over involvement in this world. Elisha ben Abuye sought to sever the Jewish people from the divine source of vitality. Assimilationism personified, ‘Aher’ saw no hope in Jewish renewal as a nation and decreed belief in the Messiah. Sooner or later, he vowed, Israel will lose its identity, melting into the pot of alien influences. Rabbi Akiva, finally, who ‘entered the pardes and emerged unharmed (beshalom),’ embodies the secret of Jewish survival. His wholeness is the ability to acknowledge disagreement among factions, paired with the will to develop mutual respect and tolerance. Ultimately, Rabbi Akiva voices the faith, beyond reason, that national unity and final redemption will someday become a reality.\(^{16}\)

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\(^{10}\) ‘Spontaneous’ – this section is prefaced: גַּהַּ... וגוֹרֵדְשׁ הָבֵית הַדְּבֵרִים שנחתדו ואלי בֵּט כָּפָר הַנְּתֹנִית. He reflects here stem from the understanding that Ben Zoma’s existential reading of ‘all the days’ as ‘the vision, through the blackest nights of exile, of divine, concealed mercy’ – while correct, eventually led Ben Zoma himself to error. TY 38-39.

\(^{11}\) B. Hagigah 14a.

\(^{12}\) TY 39. Contemporary yet also beyond time …

\(^{13}\) Compare the Torah commentary of R. Yehoshua Heschel’s great-grandfather, R. Gedaliah of Linitz, Teshuot hen:

\(^{14}\) ‘A spontaneous’ – this section is prefaced: גַּהַּ... וגוֹרֵדְשׁ הָבֵית הַדְּבֵרִים שנחתדו ואלי בֵּט כָּפָר הַנְּתֹנִית. His reflections here stem from the understanding that Ben Zoma’s existential reading of ‘all the days’ as ‘the vision, through the blackest nights of exile, of divine, concealed mercy’ – while correct, eventually led Ben Zoma himself to error. TY 38-39.

\(^{15}\) TY 40-41.

\(^{16}\) TY 39-43.
Reflections on Jewish Identity in the Contemporary Scene

Returning to the seder, R. Yehoshua Heschel proceeds to model the vision that Rabbi Akiva embodies. The next section of the Haggadah itself opens with a lyrical digression, a momentary aside from the core biblical narrative.

Blessed is the Omnipresent One, blessed be He! Blessed is He who gave the Torah to His people Israel, blessed be He! The Torah speaks of four children: One is wise, one is wicked, one is simple and one does not know how to ask.\(^{17}\)

To explain the role of this interlude on the Four Sons, R. Yehoshua Heschel suggests that beyond freedom in the basic sense, the final purpose of the Exodus was realized at Sinai.\(^{18}\) The Torah, beyond time yet eternally relevant, speaks to every kind of Jew, in each of their sitz in Leben, offering an intimate, direct channel to God.\(^{19}\) With a show of rhetorical prowess, R. Yehoshua Heschel avers this vehemently.

Sinners may be derided as ‘foolish sons,’ ‘destructive sons’ – yet God’s love for Israel never ceases. ‘No matter what, you are called His children.’\(^{20}\) Indeed, the compiler of the Haggadah may well have named these four groups as a premonition of what would come to pass. Throughout history the status and the spiritual level of the Jewish people has fluctuated greatly. Some generations excelled in wisdom and moral virtue; others abandoned morality, honestly, and universal justice to worship all manner of idolatry; then, years later, Jewish wholeness was regained once more.\(^{21}\) And our own generation! Alas, ours is truly one ‘who does not know how to ask’. Or, what they do ask is bereft of wisdom. Clever in their own eyes, they befoul themselves and know not how to come clean. […] Has there ever been a generation so audacious as our own?\(^{22}\) All the same, we mustn’t despair. For this itself comes to aver that, indeed, the era ‘on the heels of the Messiah’ (ikveta de-meshiha) is here, right now. Very soon, other prophecies will be realized as well: Our children will return to their borders and prisoners of hope to their former places of strength.\(^{23}\)

What R. Yehoshua Heschel seems to be doing here is to make sense of the present on a wider temporal horizon. The contemporary crisis in loyalty to Jewish tradition, though seemingly without precedent, when viewed on the background of the Passover story, falls into place as part of a far more encompassing historical narrative. Jewish existence is tied up with God in the inseverable bond of past experience and promise of the future. The Exodus, then, is meant to enroot and preserve that awareness.

\(^{17}\) The source of this passage is Mekhilta. TY 42-50.

\(^{18}\) On R. Yehoshua Heschel’s notions of freedom in historical context, see my discussion in Hasidic Commentary on the Torah (Oxford, 2018), 141-153.

\(^{19}\) TY 42. He continues: Thus, for the wise, Torah is source of true wisdom; for the wicked, Torah tells both of their sins and ways of repentance; for the simple, the Torah guides and protects from harm; etc.


\(^{21}\) He refers to his commentary on Pirkei avot.

\(^{22}\) In allusion, of course, to the famous premonition in B. Sotah 49b, ‘In times approaching the Messianic era, impudence will increase’.

\(^{23}\) TY 42-43. After Jer. 31: 16 and Zech. 9: 12.
All this surely makes sense as a grand narrative. Living it out is arguably a far greater challenge. R. Yehoshua Heschel now devotes some attention to the ontological and theologically painful difficulty of Jewish existence among the nations, and to the role of suffering in the formation of Jewish identity. The structure of the Haggadah, in the following passage, in fact invites this association:

‘One could suppose that [the discussion of the Exodus] must be from the first of the month. Thus, the Torah says ‘On that day.’ But ‘on that day,’ could mean in daylight; and so the Torah says, ‘It is because of this. ‘This’ means: when matzah and maror are placed before you.’

At issue, R. Yehoshua Heschel proposes, is this question: Where does the story of the Exodus really begin? Jews, famously, calculate time by moon; the nations – by the sun. The initial moment of differentiation, then, is located here, in what should rightfully be considered the first actual commandment given to the nation: ‘החדש הזה לכם – ‘this new moon – it is yours to sanctify’ (Exod. 12: 2). Here indeed is a primary gesture of Jewish autonomy and otherness. It signifies, equally, the first secret glimmer of redemption. Contemplating further, R. Yehoshua Heschel notes that lived time is thus a vital aspect of self-definition. Jews have been granted the power to sanctify time, and to transcend boundaries of time. For the world, days begin at sunrise and sink into darkness; for the Jewish people, night marks the beginning, and obscurity shall give way to light. Finally, the moon is most luminous when distant from the sun; so, too, when Jews guard their separateness, they live the fullness of true existence; drawing too close to the sun, their own light is lost. Having recognized all this, however, the Sages (in the passage cited above) make a yet stronger statement. The true nature of time and human ability to reign over it can be understood only ‘When matzah and maror are before you’. For matzah symbolizes satiety and contentment, a foretaste of redemption; maror is stricture, the bitter reality of exile. A Jew must live in awareness of both poles; must know that pain and pleasure are equally fleeting, while time past, present and future, is solely in God’s hands.

Now it is clearer, R. Yehoshua Heschel adds, why the next lines of the Haggadah recall the Jewish nation’s shameful origins: ‘In the beginning our forebears served idols and other gods.’ The trajectory of this story is very, very long: ‘It enables us to learn patience, the willingness to accept suffering, while God guards us, even now, from losing hope in a better future […] No matter what, He will not abandon us. Indeed, days are coming, and God shall say, ‘For My sake, for My sake will I act’, and then all the nations of the earth will see that we bear the Name of God.’ It is a moving final statement – perhaps one that should be read as a courageous gesture of defiance. To think this way, to reinforce this belief, is yet another tactic, a way of living time consciously rather than being victimized by world events, which seem so utterly ‘beyond our control’.

24 TY 53.
25 TY 50-53.
Anti-Semitism: A Counter-History

With an abrupt change of direction, at this point the Haggadah pulls everyone to their feet: Raise the wine goblet, cover the matzot and pronounce:

יהוה הוא שמעד - This is what has stood by our fathers and us! For not just one alone has risen against us to destroy us, but in every generation, they rise against us to destroy us. Yet the Holy One, blessed be He, saves us from their hand! Go forth and learn what Laban the Aramean wanted to do to our father Jacob.

It is a thundering recognition of Jewish persecution throughout history. The paradigmatic instance named is the biblical Laban’s animosity toward Jacob. R. Yehoshua Heschel reads these lines as a summons, an urgent call to spare no effort in discovering the underlying causes of anti-Semitism.27 While noting that the majority of the Haggadah text here is borrowed from the midrash Sifri, he wonders aloud: ‘What lies at the root of this eternal hatred for the Eternal Nation? A profound mystery that has never been resolved.’28 The next lines of his commentary summarize three well-rehearsed contemporary popular narratives:

Once, people thought the source of anti-Semitism was religion. The Torah and its commandments make the Jews a separate nation, and so a target of vengeance. In our own days, that belief has led countless rebellious sons of our people to ruin. They tried to ‘fix’ Judaism, to adapt it to suit the spirit of their time and place, to reject obsolete traditions and replace them with new-fashioned values.29 But world events would cruelly show their error. Irreligious Jews have fallen victim to the same boundless hatred vented against those loyal to the Torah and age-old ways.

Others have traced anti-Semitism to race. For the Jews are the sons of Shem, and thus they are despised by the descendants of Ham and Yefet. Yet this, too, is an empty and false belief: after all, non-Jewish Semites are not hated or persecuted.

Others long believed that the nations’ hatred for the Jews stemmed from ignorance. When civilization and culture would come to illuminate their darkness, so it was hoped, their

27 The word he uses is anti-Semite -アンティシミテ. The term first appears in Hebrew language sources in 1880 – most prominently by Judah Leib Gordon and Ahad Ha-am, while (“Others have suggested the year 1879 constitutes an appropriate embarkation point for a study of popular anti-Semitism in that it coincides with the emergence of political parties and a press embracing a comprehensive anti-Semitic ideology and is also the year in which Wilhelm Marr first coined the term ‘anti-Semitism’ in his pamphlet The Victory of Judaism over Germanism (Weinberg, 1986: 93; Bernstein, 1996: 49; Dimont, 1962: 313).” Antisemitism in Europe, 40.

28 His phrase, ‘Eternal hatred for the Eternal Nation’ is the title of a work by Nahum Sokolow (Warsaw, 1882), a prominent and highly influential Hebrew journalist. In that book, Sokolow reviews Jewish history, especially that of Eastern Europe (Russia and Poland), and discusses religious anti-Semitism, anti-Jewish legislation, and intolerance from the medieval period until his own day. He cites nationalism, especially among Slavs and Germans, as the main cause of anti-Semitism in the nineteenth century. It seems quite evident that R. Yehoshua Heschel was familiar with this work and with Sokolow’s ideas.

Each of these common narratives now discredited, R. Yehoshua Heschel turns to a radically different plane of meaning. Mystical teaching alone, paired with some incisive historiosophical insights, will expose the true, root source of anti-Semitism. ‘From the books of kabbalah we learn that the Holy blessed One, in emanating and creating all of existence, willed that He be recognized through His attributes, through the multifaced appearances by which He guides this world.’31 Within that grand, primordial divine plan,

The Jewish people was chosen to bear witness to God’s kingship, and to bring the world to completion through the Torah and its commandments. The Exodus – its purpose was to make them living witnesses to God’s absolute mastery; Torah and the Land were given to them to this end, that Israel be a light unto the nations. […] But Israel turned away, worshiped foreign powers, sinned utterly. Finally, the Temple was destroyed, the people scattered over the face of the earth, to become victims of persecution wherever they wander. Yes, miraculously, despite it all, the Jewish people goes from strength to strength. Witness the spectacular involvement of Jews in general culture. They turn the wheels of life in every secular field, unlock the mysteries of natural science; the active role of Jews in the development and perfection of human civilization vastly exceeds their tiny numbers. Truly, against unimaginable odds, ‘a wise and discerning people is this great nation!’32 A stunning, astonishing achievement. This indeed is the most compelling proof of God’s existence and providence: mercifully, secretly, He guards over each individual and enables their success. Thus, Jewish survival over the centuries, despite untold suffering and exile – this most of all bears witness to God’s greatness, an ongoing sanctification of His holy Name. And so it will be, until humanity attains its final perfection and the entire world acknowledges, at last, that ‘truly God is present in this place’.33 Clearly, then, no rational, natural cause can explain the nations’ hatred for the Jewish people. It is divine Will – that is the sole reason.

Recalling the strange phrase with which this section of the Haggadah began, R. Yehoshua Heschel concludes: ‘Thus it says, “Go forth and learn” (tse u-lemad) – go forth, leave behind all those clever

senseless hatred would fade away. But our own days have proven their delusion. The vile leprosy of anti-Semitism has infected even the most civilized of nations; with simmering, terrible hatred they expel all ‘impure’ Jewish presence from their midst.30

30 TY 60. ? W. Brustein and R. King, ‘Anti-Semitism in Europe Before the Holocaust,’ International Political Science Review (2004), Vol 25, No. 1, 35–53, p. x ‘To account for the rise of popular anti-Semitism between 1899 and 1939, we focus on the evolution and popularization of the four strains of anti-Semitism. The four strains (religious, racial, economic, and political) contain within themselves four distinct anti-Semitic narratives.5 The evolution of the four narratives of anti-Semitism provided anti-Semites with ample ammunition to wage their war against Jews during the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.’

31 In reference to Zohar 2. 42b. נַעֲשִׂיתֶּמָּםְ וּשְׁמַרְׁתֶּם אֶתְכֶּם, וְשַׁמָּרָהֲםָ נַעֲשִׂיתֶּם מָשָׂאֲםָ מִמֶּנָּם הָאֵלֶּה נַעֲשִׂיתֶּמָּםְ וְיִשְׂרָאֵל הָאֵל שְׁמַרְׁתֶּם אֱדוֹתָהוֹן וְיֵשַׂרְאֵל שְׁמַרְׁתֶּם אֱדוֹתָהוֹן וּכַל שָׁמָּרָהֲםָ נַעֲשִׂיתֶּמָּםְ וְיֵשַׂרְאֵל נַעֲשִׂיתֶּמָּםְ וְיֵשַׂרְאֵל מַעֲשִׂיתֶּם מָשָׂאֲםָ מִמֶּנָּם הָאֵלֶּה. The vile hatred they bears witness to God's greatness, iraculously, given to them its purpose. Clearly, then, no rational, natural cause can explain the nations’ hatred for the Jewish people. It is divine Will – that is the sole reason.

32 Alluding, with no irony intended, to Deut. 4: 5-6. ‘You shall safeguard and perform [the Torah’s decrees and ordinances], for this is your wisdom and discernment in the eyes of the peoples, who shall hear all these decrees and who shall say, “Surely a wise and discerning people is this great nation!”’

33 After Gen. 28: 16.
ideas and principles that try to make sense of Jewish existence among the nations [...]. Just walk the path of faith: for God is the source of everything, and all is for our ultimate benefit. It is a well-grounded theological argument, but one that bears an empowering psychological message as well. The specter of victimization is effectively erased from Jewish historical experience. Anti-Semitism, counter-intuitively, is re-figured here as a positive, formative influence, one that in fact enables Jewish identity to crystallize. Perhaps even more remarkably, in this passage R. Yehoshua Heschel effectively reconceives the essence of Judaism. In an uncommon gesture of tolerance, transcending well-rehearsed definitions of religiosity, he shows a way to integrate Jewish secular achievement within a broader vision.\footnote{TY 61-62.}

\textbf{Modes of Interpretation}

In the following pages, I would like to highlight the exegetical tools that inform R. Yehoshua Heschel thinking. They come to the fore in the next section of the \textit{Haggadah} which, at this point, incorporates a series of midrashic passages to depict the ‘signs and wonders’ that marked the Exodus. R. Yehoshua Heschel asks: What was the need for such high drama, for this breath-taking show of supernatural power? In classic homiletical style, he offers three successive responses, each of them drawing from a distinct realm of Jewish thought. The first explanation draws on central elements of rational philosophic tradition.

\begin{quote}
‘With signs’ – it is known that a sign [\textit{ot}] serves to confirm or prove a matter under doubt.\footnote{TY 71. RYH refers obliquely to conflicting stances, voiced most famously by R. Abraham ibn Ezra, R. Yehuda Halevi, and Nahmanides, on the ways that knowledge of God may best be attained. C.f., Kuzari 1.25; \textit{Kitvei haramban} 1, 151 (on Ex. 20:2). For a comprehensive discussion, see Jonathan Dauber, \textit{Knowledge of God and the Development of Early Kabbalah}, (Leiden: Brill, 2012) 96; 217-252.} In essence, then, all the signs and wonders that the Holy, blessed One wrought – their purpose was to affirm the truth and exclusivity of His kingship. Hence, the Exodus is the ultimate proof of God’s existence. It follows, then, that the first Commandment must be ‘[I am the Lord your God], Who brought you out of the Land of Egypt’, and not ‘… Who created the heavens and the earth’.\footnote{R. Yehoshua Heschel’s thought was clearly less radical than that of his contemporary, R. Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935), yet the comparison should be mentioned. In sharp contrast to ultra-Orthodox rabbis of their time, R. Kook integrated secularism in an encompassing vision of Jewish redemption.}
\end{quote}

The paragraphs in the \textit{Haggadah} that follow, however, make clear that such theologically abstract notions are not fully adequate. Something more palpable is called for to explain this dizzying show of rabbinic mathematics, in which the havoc wrought upon Egypt is multiplied exponentially. For purposes at hand, the lines from the \textit{Haggadah} cited below elide the many prooftexts brought to back up each statement.

Rabbi Yossi the Galilean asked: How do we know that the Egyptians suffered ten plagues in Egypt and on the see they suffered fifty plagues? […] Rabbi Eliezer said: How do we know
that each plague that the Holy One inflicted on them consisted of four plagues? [...] Say, therefore: In Egypt they suffered forty plagues, on the sea they suffered 200 plagues. Rabbi Akiba says: How do we know that each plague that the Holy One (Blessed be He) brought on them consisted of five plagues? [...] Therefore say: In Egypt they suffered fifty plagues, on the sea they suffered 250 plagues.38

R. Yehoshua Heschel’s second explanation resorts to a second, esoteric mode of thought. What the Sage actually recount here is the eschatological battle between the ten sefirot of holiness and their dark mirror image – the ten arch-evil forces of impurity.39 Multiply those forces by the five letters of might (gevurot) מ might מ – a code ‘foreseen by the prophets’ as a premonition of the final redemption. Thus, fifty gates of holiness – the secret of binah, the Jubilee, the world of absolute freedom – are needed to overcome fifty notorious gates of impurity. Significantly, the mythic battle that the Haggadah recounts on this reading can only take place gradually: the plagues are inflicted one by one, with long pauses in between, culminating at last in the most terrible blow of all – the death of the firstborn, corresponding with the supernal sefirah Keter.40 All this, R. Yehoshua Heschel avers, bears an urgent, timeless message for the Jewish people: ‘In everything related to the redemption of the nation and the redemption of the Land of Israel, we must not rush matters, must not force the End [the advent of the messianic era].41 [...] And so Rabbi Yehudah “gave them signs” – to teach future generations how the powers of evil will be weakened and conquered, until the time for redemption has come.’ It is a thinly veiled reference to Zionist mission, signaled here (perhaps tongue in cheek), with the summary phrase, ‘...and the enlightened (hamaskilim) will understand.’42

R. Yehoshua Heschel introduces the third plane of exegesis with the phrase ve-al derekh ha’avodah. A code expression of sorts, it shifts our attention to the ethical or spiritual facets of the matter at hand. The perspective here is specifically hasidic, with an eye to transforming esoteric concepts into a lived reality.43 On this reading, the Sages’ intent, in their exponential multiplication of the blows inflicted on the Egyptians at the sea, was above all to affect Jewish consciousness. Here,
too, the Exodus experience is meant to reverberate through the centuries, into the spiritual world of each individual Jew.

At the sea, it is written: ‘Israel saw God’s mighty hand … and the people revered Hashem’ (Exod. 14: 31). As the Rabbis taught, God lets loose harsh judgement on the wicked in order to strike awe-yirah in the heart of the world. And so the Sages magnified the rain of blows showered on Egypt. Witnessing their ruin caused the Jewish people to attain complete and perfect awe – yirat Hashem. As I have explained elsewhere, this mode is superior to awe shaped by fear of punishment – yirat Elohim […] for it comprehends love as well, as the kabbalists teach. Indeed, God’s sole purpose in making fear a reality of human existence was to enable the Jewish people to serve Him with both valences.

That said, however, the biblical account seems to depict a more complex experience. R. Yehoshua Heschel retells it with uncommon attentiveness to psychological dimensions. The verses recount that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart; the Egyptians pursued the Jews; the people caviled, ‘Were there no graves in Egypt …?’ R. Yehoshua Heschel exclaims:

But how could they?! After frightful plagues, ruin and utter chaos that they had witnessed, while they emerged, miraculously, unscathed – just a few days later, they had already forgotten what their own eyes had seen, the endless centuries of agony they had endured?! How could they say ‘Were there no graves in Egypt…?!’, ‘Better to be enslaved than to die in the desert’?! Ah, my brother, now listen carefully and hear what it means.

Drawing on a rich midrashic tradition with additional kabbalistic depths, R. Yehoshua Heschel creatively reconstructs the trajectory of spiritual growth that, in his eyes, truly shaped the Exodus experience.

In Egypt, the Jewish people saw God’s boundless mercy and compassion for them […]. Witnessing their enemies’ punishment and their own salvation, their hearts awakened with passionate flames of love, their souls filled with longing for the Divine. That flash of longing and love, those ‘points of silver’, attest to their inmost desire for holiness. Perhaps this is the meaning of the mystical notion of ‘greatness’ [gadlut] that come before ‘diminishment’ [katnut], as the kabbalists teach. But we know that love is complete when it dwells with

44 Tanhuma, Tetsave 10; ‘as the kabbalists teach’ – he cites Zohar 1 110b.
45 C.f., Divrei Yehoshua, xxxx. סדרות חסידות, ר’, שבתאי משה בר 대한 חסידות, פורד, לעם, 14
46 רבים משא שרי מפי
47 TY 78, citing Exod. 14: 11-12.
48 Parenthetically, he cites Bamidbar rabba 13, Shir ha-shirim rabba 1, Yalkut shimon s. 980 on the verse ‘Circlets of gold shall we make for you with points of silver’ (Song 1: 11), paired with the interpretation central in Lurianic teaching, of the verse, ‘I made you numerous […] and you grew and increased…’ (Ezek. 16: 7).
49 C.f., Peri et hayim, Hag ha-matzot 1.

If the fall of Man were a fall of Man, the Exodus experience would not have been in order: Hashem would not have been manifest to the people. By the very nature of the fall, the people were no longer capable of attaining a ‘small’ experience. As R. Yehoshua Heschel notes, ‘But in order to be able to witness such a large experience, a large experience is needed, not a small one.’

And so the Sages magnified the rain of blows showered on Egypt. Witnessing their ruin caused the Jewish people to attain complete and perfect awe – yirat Hashem. As I have explained elsewhere, this mode is superior to awe shaped by fear of punishment – yirat Elohim […] for it comprehends love as well, as the kabbalists teach. Indeed, God’s sole purpose in making fear a reality of human existence was to enable the Jewish people to serve Him with both valences.

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constancy in the soul, and this is possible only when awe has preceded it.\(^{50}\) Here, though, they were caught unprepared; fear, distance, awe had not yet become part of their being. And so the searing love that had flamed with them sputtered out just as abruptly. The moment of illumination disappeared. Terror, despair flooded them instead: ‘Were there no graves in Egypt?’ So it was until they reached the sea. There they witnessed more miracles, another fearful rain of blows inflicted on their enemy. And then at last they attained full, mature yirah: ‘the people revered Hashem’ in a moment of supernal vision granted to all. This highest level – it could be reached only after living through fear of Elohim. […] Now the concealed meaning of the verse is clear: ‘Circlets of gold shall we make for you with points of silver’ (Song 1: 11) – ‘circles of gold’ – symbolizing awe, yirah, combined with ‘points of silver’ – symbolizing love. As the Kabbalists teach, this integrated state is the ultimate mode of spirituality to which we must aspire.\(^{51}\)

As a whole, these three variant modes of reading the midrashic descriptions set out what Michael Fishbane calls ‘different types of religious perception and consciousness, even diverse theological orientations and ways of living with God in mind’; ‘each mode grounds its own theological horizon.’\(^{52}\) The next pages of Todat yehoshua continue the third mode of reading to foreground one of the most cogent themes in hasidic teaching, that of personal redemption (geulah peratit), while attending to the ethical work needed to attain it.\(^{53}\) Rabban Gamliel’s solemn, sweeping pronouncement serves to introduce his reflections:

> Whoever does not discuss the following three things at the seder has not fulfilled their duty:

pesach (the Passover sacrifice), matzah (the unleavened bread) and maror (the bitter herbs).\(^{54}\)

What follows, in the Haggadah, is a series of rhetorical questions treating each of these three elements in turn, along with instructive responses. R. Yehoshua Heschel’s reading transforms the questions themselves. So, for example:

> ‘This matzah – why-al shum ma [is it eaten]?’ This matzah – it is eaten for the sake of ‘ma’. Its power is spiritual: matzah helps us attain true humility (ma), to annul our excessive sense of selfhood (bitul hayesh). For matzah is ‘the bread of simplicity’ while leaven is the opposite: pride, vulgarity, fleshy self-centeredness – the contaminated shell of ‘Egypt’.\(^{55}\)

\(^{50}\) TY 77-79. Applying a series of kabbalistic concepts; now parallels the three variant numbers of plagues proposed by the Sages in the Haggadah to the three levels of yirah named in philosophical Jewish tradition: שסט, הוה, יוה – citing R. Joseph Albo, Haikarim 3.32; R. Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto, Mesilat yesharim 24, etc. C.f., x

\(^{51}\) Michael Fishbane, Sacred Attunement A Jewish Theology (Chicago, 2008), 64-65.

\(^{52}\) TY 79-89 Passage in the Haggadah known as Dayeini – thirteen stanzas; sets out parallel with 13 principles of faith; importance of recalling them on leil heseder – recall, relive, internalize; connection between ‘historical’ event and present sense of identity, J faith.

\(^{53}\) TY 92-98.

\(^{54}\) RYH interweaves a wealth of sources from Hasidic and kabbalistic teaching on the meaning of ma (xxxx) and its manifestations, ranging from cosmic to psychic realms. My paraphrase here does not do justice to the complexity and creativity of his thought.
On the dialectic that he elaborates, pride is the epitome of enslavement – demeaned servitude to the ego, bitter as death, the secret essence of ‘exile’; humility – “the secret of life itself” – grants boundless, luminous freedom, a relinquishing of egotism (*anochiyut*) before the Holy One.\(^{56}\)

The *Exodus*, the paradigmatic moment of national redemption, enacted this dialectic on the stage of history. Yet the same essential moment must be reenacted every present day, within the soul of every Jew, in what hasidic tradition famously termed ‘personal redemption’. R. Yehoshua Heschel concludes this part of his commentary, joining the two moments in a gesture of consolation: ‘Just as it was then, that the agony of servitude hastened their redemption, so too in our own times, we must believe that the bitterness of life will soon turn to sweetness. At last Night will shine like day, and darkness will be transformed to light.’\(^{57}\)

‘Not Only Once But in Each and Every Generation, They Rise Up Against Us to Destroy Us’

The vector of the *Haggadah* narrative is patently linear: ‘from slavery to freedom, from sorrow to joy, from mourning to festivity, from deep darkness to great light, and from bondage to redemption.’ Retelling it, year by year, reenacts the joyous experience of retrospective vision, and arouses a powerful sense of gratitude toward ‘the One who performed all these miracles for our fathers and for us.’ More than a founding historical event, the *Exodus* also marks a crucial ontological shift: the Jewish nation emerges from bleak ages of misery, reborn into freedom. ‘And even though other exiles would later become our reality, exile will forever after be in body alone; our souls are unchained, our redemption eternal.’\(^{58}\) A lofty ideal, to be sure, but painfully dissonant with the reality in which R. Yehoshua Heschel and his readers find themselves. This dialectic of exile and freedom raises larger questions of Jewish self-definition and integrity. Here, perhaps most cogently, R. Yehoshua Heschel emerges as religious leader sounding a powerful voice of conscience. This, it seems, is the call of the hour: Jewish existence is threatened as never before.\(^{59}\)

\(^{56}\) In this paper, I’m unable to relate in any detail to linguistic features of R. Yehoshua Heschel’s writings, but would like to point out here that the Hebrew cognate for ‘egotism’, *anochiyut* that he uses here and in other works was still a neologism in the 1920s-30s in Hebrew journalism, while nearly unheard-of in rabbinic works. C.f., (1895 – תרצ”א) א檫 תבר ייבא א(יצא תד) לע פיטר תבכר אא, צפונא 236, (תרנ”ה – 1925) והנה יש מניין על ל’ “איגואיסוס” גור בוונה Этופיאת מ”איגו”, ויכ חורונים של ”איגו” מסבירים את ”איגו” או ”איגו”, והנה היא קוראים לאיגואיסוס אתבניא, דן קוראים אול קדשא, ול קוראים ”איגואיסוס”. \(^{57}\) RY 98-101, after Ps. 139:19. The dialectic that he sets out is a good deal more intricate and sophisticated than my simplified version here. The understanding of egotism, or self-centeredness that he develops stems from Abraham’s charged exchange with God:

\begin{quote}

> המ שברנו את אבותינו, לקי אבותנו, לקי האבות, לקי התשובה שלא אבותנו, לקי אבותינו...

> עשה נאםLouis, וחתם עלו, וakens על הוזה את אבותנו, וakest את אבותנו, וakest את אבותנו, וakest את אבותנו.

> והנה ישראל, שנאםLouis, וחתם עלו, וakest את אבותנו, וakest את אבותנו, וakest את אבותנו.

> והנה ישראל, שנאםLouis, וחתם עלו, וakest את אבותנו, וakest את אבותנו, וakest את אבותנו.

\end{quote}

\(^{58}\) TY 102-103. Here too, kabbalistic sources are central to his argument; he cites R. Moses Cordovero, *Pardes rimonim*.

\(^{59}\) Antisemitism in America was at its height in the interwar years, with restrictions and quotas imposed on Jews in wide range of social contexts. As Jonathan Sarna notes, ‘Leading Americans, including Henry Ford and the widely listened-to radio priest, Father Charles Coughlin, engaged in public attacks upon Jews, impugning their character and patriotism. In several major cities, Jews also faced physical danger; attacks on young Jews were commonplace.’ ‘The American Jewish Experience in the Twentieth Century: Antisemitism and Assimilation, xx.'
urgency, he informs not only his readers but, seemingly, the world itself, about the true meaning of freedom, while alerting all who listen to dangerously false notions of freedom that must be combatted. The year, you recall, is 1935.

Yes, mercifully, we were set free. Like all living things, human beings most of all long to be free. But do not imagine that liberty and absolute freedom are the ultimate good. For human nature contains deadly poison. Unconstrained, people’s animal instincts drive them to attack others with venomous fury. [...] Were it not for limitations imposed by the state, confining man’s freedom, his viral bestiality would plunder and destroy the whole world and everything in it. Thus, the Rabbis said that a measure of submissiveness to a worthy, higher source is more vital than absolute freedom. But to what higher power?

Many, R. Yehoshua Heschel notes, have long believed that the human intellect can reign and control the baser instincts. But human minds are notoriously manipulative. With elegant logic, ‘people justify their sinful deeds, make ugliness beautiful and glorify what is vile, affirm falsehood and deny the truth, proclaiming all the while that they must destroy in order to rebuild, and that the end justifies the means. A thoroughly senseless ideology, invented by blood-thirsty minds coveting the property of others […] all in the name of Reason.’ Other false intellectuals ‘champion freedom, promise to repair the world in the kingship of universal equality. All too quickly, though, their hearts flood with hatred and lust for power; brandishing their swords, they lay the world to ruin.’

R. Yehoshua Heschel’s voice rises in urgency:

We ourselves are living witnesses to it. We saw it with our own eyes, all that befell our people in Russia during those terrible years 1919, 1920, 1921. The same is taking place right now in Ashkenaz. Overnight, citizens and their leaders lost every shadow of humanity and turned into wild beasts, ruthless night-wolves and desert vipers. Germany’s vaunted culture and civilization is bankrupt – brutality, theft and murder now devastate the land. Where, then, is the Intellect? Where are the minds of sixty million people? Clearly, rational thought is utterly powerless against the raging animal in the human heart.

And thus! We mustn’t rely on reason to decide whom we should serve and to whom we will be subject. God alone must be our master. Divine service is the sole form of real freedom – freedom from animal desires, from alien and distorted thinking, from self-love, from sadness and worry. Only by accepting the yoke of Heaven can one truly become a free agent. Those who cast off that yoke, who reject their obligation to Torah and mitzvot – it is they who are radically unfree, enslaved to alien forces that assault them endlessly. And thus, at God’s first revelation to Moses at the Burning Bush, He said, ‘This is your sign that I have sent you: When you take the people out of Egypt, you will serve God on this mountain’ (Exod. 3: 12).

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60 TY 104. ‘התכלית מקדשת את האמצעים’ – ‘the end justifies the means’ – a phrase associated with the ideology behind the 1917 Bolshevik coup d’état and a byword of Marxism used to justify the elimination of all opponents by any means.

61 Alluding of course to Communist doctrine.

62 TY 104.
For God did not wish to abandon them, even for a moment, to the anarchy threatened by absolute freedom. And, so, the Exodus transformed the people: the moment they ceased being slaves to Pharaoh, they became servants of God.\(^63\)

These lines doubtless resonated deeply with R. Yehoshua Heschel’s reading audience. The Jewish press was full of shocking reports of anti-Jewish violence, as fear mounted. In a more general sense, his reflections are part of a larger thematic: Jewish self-definition in opposition to inimical others. This comes to the fore in the next lines of the Haggadah, an impassioned plea for the destruction of Israel’s enemies. We may well imagine that this emotional climax of the seder (and, arguably, its most provocative text) posed a formidable exegetical challenge for R. Yehoshua Heschel – an émigré rabbi striving to build a new home and community in ‘the land of the free and home of the brave.’

Pour out Your wrath (shefokh hamatekha) upon the nations that do not acknowledge You, upon the kingdoms that do not call upon Your name. For they have devoured Jacob and desolated his home. Pour out Your wrath on them; may Your blazing anger overtake them. Pursue them in wrath and destroy them from under the heavens of the Lord.\(^64\)

Medieval commentators on the Haggadah wrestled with theological and religious questions these lines arouse, while some modern readers choose to blur or eliminate their politically incorrect thrust.\(^65\) RYH contextualizes his own response with a brief excursus on cultural anthropology and the evolution of ethical systems. ‘The religion of ancient Egyptians was essentially dualistic: they believed the world was ruled by warring powers of good and evil. In their own eyes, Egypt embodied “goodness”, while Israel was “evil” in essence, and this justified their enslavement.\(^66\) A long parenthetical comment follows:

Remnants of these ignorant, senseless beliefs endure even in our own generation. These days, they are intelligently termed ‘racial purity’ (ראסוסן תוערא), with the claim that Aryan and Jewish blood are inherently different. But just as the Egyptians enslaved Israel in the name of their false beliefs and were eradicated in the end, so too in our world today, we believe and hope that the cunning proponents of the new, despicable racial theory, who wield it to demean Jewish honor, will be wiped out, their names and memory erased forever. [...] May it be speedily in our days, Amen.\(^67\)

Notably, however, R. Yehoshua Heschel resists seeing these lines as a plea for divine intervention or vengeance, even though the ominous threat of Nazism would certainly warrant it. Rather, he reads

\(^{63}\) TY 102-105.

\(^{64}\) Citing three verses: Ps. 79: 6-7; Ps. 69: 25; Lam. 3: 66. Note, though, that a number of different versions were in use in medieval Ashkenaz, and other variants in the Sephardic and Italian traditions. The passage cited above entered the Ashkenazi Haggadah most probably in the wake of the First Crusade (1095-1099). Its first appearance is in the Mahzor Vitry, composed before 1105.


\(^{66}\) His prooftext: ...וכנמה שמאר פשרת ראה כי רעה נא פלטס - וברדש... TY 114.
them, once again, as an autonomous, courageous statement of Jewish identity, a positive difference that distinguishes Jews from all other nations.

But know: it is not from self-love or self-interest that we speak of our greatness. The vulgar chauvinism that gives Aryans their debased sense of superiority and spawns their rabid anti-Semitism, their false theory of pure and impure blood – all that is alien to our very being. Our distinction, our goal in life is to teach the principles of faith, the foundations of justice and integrity on which the world rests; our Torah is the source of all goodness, mercy, and compassion. It was the Torah that first proclaimed faith in a single deity, the first that demanded the end of perpetual slavery (טבביוות השולמות); the Torah commanded love of converts and granted equal rights to all human beings. Thus, tonight, as we celebrate the first redemption and the founding of our nationhood, we pronounce: ‘Pour out Your wrath on those nations who refuse to acknowledge You’ – so that they may influence the world no more..

A New History of Hope
The final section of the Haggadah integrates long passages from the liturgy in an emotionally-centered gesture of gratitude to God. R. Yehoshua Heschel reads them dialogically as he voices, with the blunt honesty of a survivor, the difficulty of living them out. Human suffering obscures a naïve certainty of God’s continual, merciful presence and protection. The task, then, is to reconnect to an invisible source, some hidden realm of faith, beyond reason. This part of his commentary subtly links the Haggadah’s central theme of collective, national redemption with the novel hasidic concept of ‘individual redemption’ as an event beyond time, for it takes place inwardly. After all, personal experience will always be the most powerful and convincing testimony to God’s powerful presence – both in Jewish history and in every individual’s private life. RYH’s voice here is that of a wise teacher, guiding and instructing, deftly intertwining insights from rabbinic, philosophical, and hasidic traditions to drive his message home. These final pages cogently set out a spiritual path of growth, informed by memory of the past and hope for the future.

“The Lord, who has remembered us, will bless – He will bless the House of Israel, will bless the House of Aaron; He will bless those who fear Him, the small with the great.” God will shower us with blessings, but it will be in measure with our faith in Him, commensurate to our connection [devekut] to Him. As Rambam famously wrote, the greater one’s love and

68 R. Yehoshua Heschel adds that ‘the injunction re. absolute annihilation of the seven nations (Judges 20: 16) – this was warranted to prevent those nations, who occupied the Land of Israel, from causing the Jewish people to sin – for those nations are the epitome of evil, whose desire is to ruin, destroy and desecrate the foundations of justice. But others who remain loyal to the seven Noahide laws – it is our obligation to help them live. All this is clearly set out in the Torah, the Talmud, and posekim and this is not the place to elaborate further.’
69 TY 114.
70 TY 126.
adherence to God, the more fully will His providential concern encompass one. For being ‘remembered’ is bound up with divine providence. 71 […]

“Until now Your mercies have helped us, and Your kindnesses have not forsaken us. Do not abandon us, Lord our God, forever!” As I explained elsewhere, on the midrash, “‘Those who know Your Name will trust in You” – but whence such trust? – “for You have not forsaken those who seek You, Hashem.” 72 The question is acute: How, indeed, can we declare with such certainty that God will never abandon us? As I have explained, knowledge of the past strengthens hope for the future. Thus, even when consumed with pain and sorrow, one must guard oneself from despair, must cling to the hope that God will help. Still, though, how is it possible to harbor such faith when the present seems so very bitter? How can one still hope for light with black clouds all around? Yet when one recalls one’s own past – from the first moment of birth until this very day, the countless times that God has saved one – that retrospective vision reinforces one’s faith that God will illuminate every darkness in the future as well. […] This, then, is what the midrash says: Read your own personal history, read the history of the Jewish people, and you will see that God’s protection is everlasting. Truly, He will never abandon us. 73

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I conclude with some thoughts on Todat yehoshua within the larger context of R. Yehoshua Heschel’s oeuvre. The Haggadah itself, perhaps more than any other classical Jewish text, lends itself to historical commentary. Having said that, I would suggest that the historiographic thrust of R. Yehoshua Heschel’s reading of it is nonetheless remarkable. The theme of Jewish history as inherently holy, of God’s hidden presence enabling Jewish survival against impossible odds, runs through his commentary. A powerful subtext informs it as well: R. Yehoshua Heschel is responding here to other, new histories of the Jews being published in his lifetime: misguided counter-narratives that, in his eyes, undermine the age-old understanding of the past and promise of redemption so vital to Jewish tradition. 74

The following lines, penned by R. Yehoshua Heschel years earlier to an unnamed ‘enlightened’ young man [maskil] expresses his concerns directly:

71 TY 115, citing Psa. 115:14, here as part of Hallel. Although he cites Maimonides’ principle of hashgahah, RY seems to be adapting it rather radically. The crucial factor that RYH calls ‘love and adherence to God’ (devekut) is conceived quite differently by Maimonides: on his understanding, the level of providential concern for a person depends on that person’s intellectual achievement and philosophical perfection. See Guide for the Perplexed 3.17-18. The connection RYH cites between memory and divine providence is from Nahmanides; see his commentary on Num. 1: 2 - 2 renown הפקידה זכרון והשגחה על דבר, כלשון ופקד את דבר שרה מועד (בראשית כא א), והוא פתרונו בכל מקום (ביון ענס) מאה ו蹼 מצות, מית לימים ורשرعا ו. 72 Midrash Tehillim 9. 73 TY 128-129. 74 As Shmuel Feiner notes, ‘understanding that Judaism had undergone significant changes throughout the centuries was the key to developing historical consciousness, an essential feature of Jewish engagement with modernity.’ Haskalah and History: The Emergence of a Modern Jewish Historical Consciousness (Portland: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2002).
As I have said: Knowledge of the past reinforces hope for the future. But look what our learned historians have done. Does their version of history reflect these ideals? No, my friend! The history they write belies Israel’s might and glory, robs Israel of all hope in the future. I would not err in saying that our Hebrew historians have sinned more than the son of Nabat who placed idols in holy places, by publicly denying the world’s creation, the miracles of the Exodus, and every other sacred moment since then until this very day.75

Put otherwise, while the Haggadah remains a holy book for all generations – or, more exactly, because of its holiness – it invites an understanding of history that recognizes and contends with all that is radically unholy: from secularism, enlightenment and Zionism in the Jewish camp, to Marxism, Communism, anarchy, Nazism, and contemporary anti-Semitism. Todat Yehoshua, seen in that light, is a heroic attempt to read history through the spectrum of the Haggadah while remaining closely attuned to modern mentalities.76 Moreover, the spiritual insights gained from such a reading radiate far beyond the immediate exegetical sphere of commentary on a traditional Jewish text to outline a way of living, with integrity, as a Jew in this brave new world.

75 I cite an unpublished letter, apparently written while R. Yehoshua Heschel lived in Uman, Ukraine (1910 or earlier).

76 It is an achievement all the more noteworthy when placed within the social and cultural context of Orthodox Jewry in 1930’s North America. The liaison between this work – with its philosophical, kabbalistic and hasidic concepts and modes of exegesis – and the Rabbi Hayyim Berlin Yeshiva, a stronghold of Lithuanian, mitnagdic Orthodox Jewry is remarkable. The warmth and enthusiasm with which his commentary was received (see the Afterward published at the end of Todat yehoshua, 141-142) attests to the esteem that the wider Orthodox community had for him. Needless to say, it was above all R. Yehoshua Heschel’s learned stature, exemplary personal traits, and leadership qualities that won him wide-spread respect. The first section of the volume published in honor of his seventieth birthday, Sefer hayovel, eloquently attests to this. There was a personal connection too, it seems, stemming from many years earlier. In his memoirs (the second section of the Jubilee volume), R. Yehoshua Heschel notes that his first published work, a commentary on the Torah entitled Divrei yehoshua (part 1), 1899, won wide acclaim. He received letters from ‘the tsadikim of the generation, hasidim and maskilim, even from the geonim of Lithuania – R. Hayyim Berlin, R. Michal Epstein, R. Hillel David Trevis’. Sefer hayovel, 62.