

## **Rabbi Anne Ebersman**

### **Bridging Differences at the Abraham Joshua Heschel School**

The world is a very narrow bridge  
The most important thing is not to be afraid

-- Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav

#### Abstract

A key component of the mission of the Abraham Joshua Heschel School, a Jewish parochial school in New York City, is “building bridges between different sectors of the Jewish community, and between the Jewish community and other communities, as expressions of our religious imperative to unite human beings through justice, shared humanity and mutual respect.”<sup>1</sup> We employ a number of different educational strategies as we seek to implement this mission with our students. These strategies include: (1) providing inspiring examples for our students of individuals who dedicated their lives to building such bridges, particularly our namesake, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (2) stressing, throughout our curriculum, the importance of learning how to take on perspectives other than one’s own, and (3) giving our students age-appropriate opportunities to take concrete steps towards building bridges themselves, both within the Jewish community and by reaching out to other communities.

#### **I. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Builder of Bridges**

Our school is named for one of the great rabbis of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was born in Poland in 1907. After completing a doctorate in Philosophy from the University of Berlin, he was deported to Poland by the Nazis in 1938. With great effort, he managed to obtain an American visa and in 1940 he sailed for New York City.<sup>2</sup>

Rabbi Heschel’s dissertation was a study of the Biblical prophets. He writes that the core of the prophetic message is that God desires justice and love of other human beings above all, more than religious observance or ceremonies: “Amos and the prophets who followed him not only stressed the primacy of morality over sacrifice, but even

claimed that the worth of worship, far from being absolute, is contingent upon moral living...Questioning man's right to worship through offerings and songs, they [the Prophets] maintained that the primary way of serving God is through love, justice and righteousness."<sup>3</sup>

Rabbi Heschel was deeply influenced by the message of the prophets as well as the Jewish teachings he absorbed during his childhood from the many rabbis in his family, " ' I was very fortunate' he told an interviewer, 'in having lived as a young boy in an environment where there were many people...of spirituality and integrity, people who have shown great compassion and understanding for others' ".<sup>4</sup>

After arriving in America, Rabbi Heschel began to seek ways to put the lessons he had learned as a child, and the message of the prophets which he studied as a young man, into action. In America's open society, he sought and found opportunities to seek justice and build bridges not just within the Jewish community but in the larger world in which he found himself.

Having experienced first-hand the terrible toll of anti-semitism in Europe (Heschel's mother and three of his sisters perished in the Holocaust, after many fruitless attempts on his part to obtain visas for them to come to America), Heschel was extremely troubled by the prejudice he saw in America against black Americans. In 1963, he was asked to be the keynote speaker at the National Conference on Religion and Race. It was at this conference that he met Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Dr. King, a black Christian minister from Atlanta, was the leading figure of the Civil Rights movement in the South, which sought to achieve equal rights for Black Americans. At that time in American history, in the South, blacks were often prevented from voting (though it was their

Constitutional right), had to sit on the back of public busses and were not allowed to drink from the same water fountains as whites. The Civil Rights movement sought to change all of this using the principles of non-violent disobedience that King had learned about in his studies of Mahatma Ghandi.<sup>5</sup>

Rabbi Heschel and Dr. King became very close friends and Rabbi Heschel took great personal risks to support Dr. King in his efforts for justice. On March 7<sup>th</sup>, 1965, Rabbi Heschel, along with Americans all over the country, watched in horror as the evening news showed images of a non-violent civil rights protest in Alabama which was met with a brutal police assault. A hundred or so people marching from Selma to Montgomery Alabama to raise awareness for civil rights efforts, were attacked by the police with dogs and tear gas, and severely beaten with clubs. When Dr. King decided to respond to the violence by repeating the march several weeks later, this time with many more people, he called his friend Rabbi Heschel and asked him to stand by his side. Despite his family's concern for his safety, Rabbi Heschel flew to Alabama on Sunday March 20<sup>th</sup>, attended a religious service with Dr. King and then stood arm in arm with Dr. King as they marched from Selma.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to his collaborations with Dr. King, Rabbi Heschel made significant contributions to Jewish-Catholic relations by travelling to Rome to meet with Pope Paul VI. In part as a result of Heschel's audience with the Pope, Vatican II included changes to Church dogma to reflect a more tolerant and accepting attitude towards Jews.<sup>7</sup>

Students at the Heschel School learn about Rabbi Heschel's life as an integral part of the school's curriculum. Every year an assembly is held to celebrate and honor his accomplishments, in particular the ways in which he worked to build bridges to the

Christian community through his collaborations with Dr. King. Students learn to sing Christian spirituals and feel deep sense of personal connection to Rabbi Heschel's role in the Civil Rights movement. They are taught to see Rabbi Heschel's legacy of reaching out in the name of justice as a core element of their Jewish identities. (short video clip [here](#))

## II. Learning to Build a Bridge by Taking Another Perspective

In addition to inspiring our students with role models like Rabbi Heschel, it is critical to teach them skills that will enable them follow his example. One such skill is the ability to take someone else's perspective. As Thomas Lickona writes in his book, *Educating for Character*: "We can't very well respect other people and act justly towards their needs if we don't understand them. A fundamental goal of moral education must be to help students to experience the world from the point of view of others, especially those who are different from themselves."<sup>8</sup>

Our students begin studying the Hebrew Bible when they are approximately 8 years old and immediately begin encountering stories with moral ambiguity and the potential for multiple perspectives. One such story is Genesis 21, the tale of Abraham's family.

God took note of Sarah as God had promised and God did for Sarah what God had promised. Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age...Abraham gave his newborn son, whom Sarah had borne him, the name of Isaac.

Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing. She said to Abraham, "Cast out that serving woman and her son for the son of that woman shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac."<sup>9</sup>

How a story like this one is approached in the classroom will be critical in forming how a child grows to understand his or her Jewish identity and how he or she grows to view others. There are deep ethical questions raised in these few short lines. As Lawrence Kohlberg has taught, children develop morally by wrestling with moral dilemmas. Students at the Heschel School are encouraged to wrestle with this story in many different ways. One recent assignment was to dramatize a conversation between two of the characters in this story that might have taken place after the verses above.

Here is what one pair of students wrote, in the voices of Abraham and Sarah.

Sarah: I want to banish Hagar.

Abraham: But she is my wife.

Sarah: She is also my servant.

Abraham: I know that but it is not right to banish her.

(5 second pause)

Sarah: I am worried that her son Ishmael will teach our son Isaac to worship other gods.

Abraham: Ishmael would never do a bad thing like that. He is a good boy. Why do you dislike them so much?

Sarah: I want our family to be Jews and not Egyptians [according to the Torah, Hagar is Egyptian]

Abraham: Sarah, God understands that we want to be Jews. And Hagar does not want to change that.

Using their own words and their own developing moral understanding, these 4<sup>th</sup> graders begin to explore the tensions and competing objectives inherent in this difficult story. Through Sarah's voice, they portray a perspective which is exclusively concerned

with the future of the Jewish people. Sarah worries about the influence of other cultures on her family. Her mission, from which she does not waver, no matter what the cost, is to ensure that the Jewish people successfully survives to the next generation (“I want our family to be Jews and not Egyptians”).

Perhaps more interesting is how they imagine Abraham’s perspective on the situation. Abraham does not agree with his wife’s single-minded focus on Isaac and the future of the Jewish people. His concern is for Hagar and Ishmael’s rights. When Sarah suggests banishing Hagar, he responds, “I know [that she is your servant] but it is not right to banish her.” It is interesting to note that following this comment, they include the stage direction “5 second pause.” Clearly Sarah finds something compelling about Abraham’s comment and is thinking it over.

The students introduce the distinction between what is expedient and what is morally right through Abraham’s voice. Later in the dialogue, when Sarah expresses concern that Ishmael will introduce Isaac to other gods, Abraham challenges her assessment of Ishmael’s character: “Ishmael would never do a bad thing like that. He is a good boy.”

In this brief dialogue, these students are taking their first steps towards trying on multiple perspectives. When these students learn, in the next few verses, that the Torah does finally allow Sarah to banish Hagar and Ishmael, their experiment in perspective-taking will color how they understand the story’s conclusion. If we as educators have done our job, they will be able to understand both how this action served the Jewish people but at the same time that it was not fair or just. It is our hope and our intention that Abraham’s imagined words, “it is not right to banish her” will become part of their

understanding of the story, as will the power and strength of Sarah's fidelity to her mission of furthering the Jewish people.

### III. Building Our Own Bridges

Finally, each student needs opportunities to take action, to experience for him- or herself what it is like to be bridge builders and reach out to others. At our school, every grade participates in a specific community service project designed for their age and developmental level. One representative project is highlighted below.

Several years ago, an elementary school teacher brought to our attention the work of a friend of hers who was teaching in Malawi. The teacher at our school had learned from her friend that the students there are without many basic supplies. When our teacher brought this problem up to her 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students, they decided to take action. They implemented a school-wide school supply drive, beginning by meeting with the woman who runs the school in Malawi to find out exactly what was needed and then disseminating the information to students, parents and faculty. After collecting and packing up the supplies, the students were pleased to receive letters from the children in Malawi showing them how the supplies were being used.

In the course of this project, in addition to helping others with a concrete problem, the students learned a great deal about what life is like in a community very different from their own. Looking at pictures of classroom life in Malawi, they took very seriously the stark differences. For instance, in Malawi, one teacher has 60 children; at our school there are 2 teachers for every 25 children. They learned about many other ways that school in Malawi is different from their own experience, and some ways that things are

not so different (everybody loves to play ball at recess). Perhaps even more important than the assistance they were able to offer the school in Malawi was the way in which this project raised our students' consciousness about their own lives, about the many privileges of which they are the recipients daily, and the fact that many other children are not so lucky. The students were able to experience in a very concrete way how they can use their own resources to make a small step towards building a world in which there is less inequity.

#### IV. Conclusion

Rabbi Nahman teaches that “the world is a very narrow bridge and the most important thing is not to be afraid.” There are so many ways in which the work of building tolerance feels like narrow bridge. As we look over the edge, we can see how easy it would be to fall into habits of insularity and even bigotry, to “circle the wagons,” to use an American expression, and only focus on our own communities. Rabbi Nahman pleads with us to have courage, to continue the work even when it is difficult, not to succumb to fear or despair so that we can cross the bridge towards other communities and other people, and in doing so bring more unity and peace to the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel School, Educational and Religious Policy Handbook, p.4

<sup>2</sup> Susannah Heschel, ed. *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, Essays by Abraham Joshua Heschel. (New York, 1996) p. xv

<sup>3</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York, 1962) p. 195

<sup>4</sup> Susannah Heschel, p. ix



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<sup>5</sup> Or Rose, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Man of Spirit, Man of Action, (New York, 2003) p. 57

<sup>6</sup> Edward Kaplan, Spiritual Radical: Abraham Joshua Heschel in America, (New Haven, 2007) p. 222

<sup>7</sup> Kaplan, p. 240

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Lickona, Educating for Character, (New York, 1991) p. 55

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 21: -2, 9-11