

Abraham Joshua Heschel

1963, late Spring, with Dr. King

United Synagogue Convention

We still feel the blow to our head. Huge chunks are falling from the heavens, but we have yet to grasp the rupture and the misfortune that has befallen us. We are still waiting for the funeral, not yet ready to sit shiva. Distraught, broken, confused and petrified, we are living in a state of chaos. We celebrate our joyous occasions, but it's akin to holding a wedding ceremony at a cemetery.

Our enjoyments are awkward and even grotesque, mere this-worldly pleasures. Our people was consumed by fire. And the world is unchanged. The ash of human skeletons emits no odor. The atmosphere of the world is not contaminated. Our bread is fresh, our sugar is sweet. The screams of millions of victims of the crematoria were never transmitted over the radio waves.

Hush, quiet; nothing ever happened. If we still had a heart, then it has turned to stone. I often sit and wonder: perhaps our souls went up in flames along with their bodies in Majdanek and Auschwitz.

Ours is Godless world. We Jews dance around the Golden Calf. We have forgotten that we live in a world that is *treyf* (impure). The times are dark, yet we do not even light the Sabbath candles. Six million Jews went up in smoke. Blood will not remain silent. But our conscience is mute as a wall. We are inebriated and distracted by the follies of this world.

The martyrs do not need our recitations of kaddish – but we need someone to recite kaddish over us, for us, because we have lost our souls.

I do not seek merely to unburden my heart. We will not fulfill our obligation by reciting lamentations. Our task is not to bang our heads against the wall. Our task is to find an answer to a crucial question: what is our generation's obligation? What is the task? Not to forget, never to be indifferent to other people's suffering.