

How to Use Speaking of Faith Discussion Guides

Facilitator Notes



From Krista Tippett

I'm delighted that you've purchased this Discussion Guide. I hope you find it a meaningful extension of your experience of Speaking of Faith.

These Discussion Guides were developed with a number of possible settings in mind—places of worship, schools, religious education study groups, family discussions, and informal gatherings such as book clubs. Our aim is to help you find ways to carry on the conversations you hear on Speaking of Faith—to trace the program's intersection of religious ideas and real life in your family or community. In my experience, when we do that, we also learn how to walk that line together more imaginatively and practically.

Feel free to adapt this guide to your particular needs and interests. Don't feel compelled to refer to it as a textbook, or to work through every single question. We've composed a wide range of topics and questions so you can choose the most important, most resonant and most appropriate for your group. You might focus deeply on a single question or move through many. You may work through the topic in one discussion, or extend it over two or more.

This guide is designed to be useful whether or not you have listened to the program. But it may enrich your experience to listen to all or part before you gather for conversation. Programs are available at speakingoffaith.org—you can stream the audio, or support Speaking of Faith by purchasing the program on CD or as an MP3 download.

What comes next? We'd love to hear from *you*. We're excited to learn where this guide leads you, and how we can join with our listeners and Web visitors to make each conversation smarter, wiser, and more fruitful. We will use your feedback as we explore the many ways we can keep working and talking together. Write to us at mail@speakingoffaith.org.

—Krista Tippett, host, Speaking of Faith

About Speaking of Faith

Speaking of Faith is public radio's conversation about religion, meaning, ethics, and ideas. It is produced and distributed by American Public Media. Each week, Krista Tippett and her guests ask how perspectives of faith might distinctively inform and illuminate our public reflection.

Speaking of Faith learning materials are developed with major funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The Spiritual Audacity of Abraham Joshua Heschel

Discussion Guide



Rabbi Heschel speaks at an event protesting the Vietnam War on March 10, 1969. The group Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam (CALCAV) convened at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, a Christian institution across the street from Jewish Theological Seminary where Heschel taught. (John Goodwin)

From Krista Tippett

A list of Abraham Joshua Heschel's books alone is evocative—among them *God in Search of Man*, *Man Is Not Alone*, and his epic works *The Prophets* and *The Sabbath*. His daughter Susannah, an esteemed scholar of Jewish studies at Dartmouth College, has titled her seminal collection of his writings and speeches, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, after a stunning line from a telegram he sent to President John F. Kennedy in 1963. Heschel wrote, “We forfeit the right to worship God as long as we continue to humiliate negroes . . . The hour calls for high moral grandeur and spiritual audacity.”

Looking back now, Abraham Joshua Heschel appears dramatically prescient—prophetic in every sense of that word—on watershed shifts that began in the 1960s and continue to reverberate and unfold in the present.

We can't, of course, predict what Heschel would say about the details of our contemporary crises, such as the current war in Iraq. But the way he analyzed the morality of U.S. military engagement in Vietnam might guide us. He studied the situation in Vietnam. He saw misery, corruption and despair in the population of South Vietnam, which could be traced back to colonial exploitation. He wrote, “It became clear to me that in regard to cruelties committed in the name of a free society, some are guilty while all are responsible.”

Heschel didn't advocate that people of different faiths should tolerate each other; he believed that they need one another.

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We can't, similarly, know how Heschel would approach dialogue with Islam in the post-September 11 world. But scholar Arnold Eisen, who leads us through Heschel's thought and its resonance in modern life in this discussion, says Heschel would undoubtedly urge us to creative initiative. I find Heschel's writings on interfaith encounter arresting in their boldness and originality, even in this later world in which pluralism is a fraught but essential reality of life. Heschel didn't advocate that people of different faiths should *tolerate* each other; he believed that they *need* one another. He coined the term "depth theology" to describe "prerequisites" of faith that should underpin interfaith encounter—such as a sense of the mystery in all of life on which no tradition could claim a monopoly.

Most strikingly and instructively, perhaps, Heschel's passion for taking people of other faiths seriously was not at odds with his profound Jewish identity. It emerged, rather, from the heart of his religious observance and sensibility, his sense of the ineffable before which even the most devout faith was "insufficient." In other words, because Heschel was steeped in and formed by ancient Jewish tradition, he recognized the holiness of the Christians with whom he marched in Selma. In that moment, he wrote famously, "I felt my legs were praying."

It is surely a test of Heschel's prophetic mettle that his words remain so provocative even now, and that his life and writings continue to echo in unexpected ways through modern lives both Jewish and non-Jewish. I leave you with Heschel's own words:



I would say about individuals: an individual dies when he ceases to be surprised. What keeps me alive—spiritually, emotionally, intellectually—is my ability to be surprised. I say, I take nothing for granted. I am surprised every morning that I see the sun shine again. When I see an act of evil, I am not accommodated—I don't accommodate myself to the violence that goes on everywhere. I'm still surprised. That's why I'm against it; why I can fight against it. We must learn how to be surprised, not to adjust ourselves. I am the most maladjusted person in society.

—Krista Tippett, host, *Speaking of Faith*

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The Spiritual Audacity of Abraham Joshua Heschel

Discussion Questions



When religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion—its message becomes meaningless.

Abraham Joshua Heschel

I've learned from the prophets that I have to be involved in the affairs of man, in the affairs of suffering man.

Abraham Joshua Heschel

1. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel called himself the “most maladjusted person in society” because of his refusal to accommodate himself to evil. He stated that the opposite of good was not evil but rather indifference, and that we combat indifference by learning “how to be surprised.”
 - *Do you agree that individuals accommodate violence and evil in the world through indifference? What do you think causes people to become indifferent?*
 - *How do we “learn how to be surprised”? Is it possible to be surprised at something as commonplace as violence?*
 - *Think of the last newspaper you read or the most recent newscast you heard on radio or television. How “surprised” were you by stories of crime, corruption or violence? Which kind of events surprised you more—local, national or international?*

2. The Hebrew prophets were a powerful influence on Heschel. He called them “some of the most disturbing people who ever lived.” In particular, the prophets were vocal about the darker side of the human condition, a message Heschel embraced. “The spirit of the prophet, the message of the prophet, is very much alive,” he said. The prophets “combine very deep love and very powerful dissent, painful rebuke, with unwavering hope.”
 - *Who plays this role in contemporary American society?*
 - *How do you balance love and dissent, rebuke and hope in your own life? What models or resources does your spiritual tradition provide to help you?*

3. Heschel placed blame for religion’s apparent declining influence in relation to science and secularism in his time on religion itself. “Religion declined, not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid,” he said, suggesting that religion in its current form is a pale imitation of the real thing.
 - *Do you agree with Heschel’s assessment that the influence of religion declined in the twentieth century? Do you agree that religion itself contributed to that decline?*
 - *Can you relate to Heschel’s characterization of religion as “irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid”? Why or why not?*
 - *Within your own tradition, can you recall a past experience—or imagine a future one—that could be described as “relevant, interesting, liberating, exciting”? Do you consider such experiences to be rare or fairly routine?*

The Spiritual Audacity of Abraham Joshua Heschel

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In regard to cruelties committed in the name of a free society, some are guilty while all are responsible.

Abraham Joshua Heschel

What keeps me alive—spiritually, emotionally, intellectually—is my ability to be surprised.

Abraham Joshua Heschel



Arnold Eisen is chancellor of The Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City. He is an expert in American Judaism and works on issues relating to Jewish identity, the revitalization of Jewish tradition and the redefinition of the American Jewish community. He has taught at Stanford, Columbia and Tel Aviv University. His books include *Taking Hold of Torah: Jewish Commitment and Community in America*.

4. Arnold Eisen, an expert in American Judaism, recounts a personal meeting with Heschel in which the rabbi said, “My tradition not only gives me the right to speak in its name, but the duty.” Heschel considered it an obligation to speak out and to act. “The message of the prophets is that God needs us in some way,” says Eisen. “[Heschel is] just announcing the same message that the biblical prophets did over and over again: that God wants something from us. That God needs us to help God make this world better.”
 - *Do you consider yourself a representative of your tradition in the way Heschel described? What does this mean for your day-to-day life?*
 - *What do you think Heschel means when he says that God needs humans to make this world better? Why would God rely on humans in this way?*

5. Heschel, who shared a close friendship with Martin Luther King Jr., was an active and vocal participant in the civil rights movement. He was also an outspoken critic of the Vietnam War at a time when many of his contemporaries supported the conflict. Heschel based these actions squarely on his understanding of biblical teaching and narratives, such as the Exodus story.
 - *What sacred stories or other examples does your tradition uphold as metaphors for understanding social problems?*
 - *How do your spiritual beliefs inform your actions in the world?*

6. Heschel balanced his Jewish identity with an inclusive attitude toward believers of other faiths. “He encountered other people of faith and I think was open enough to see in them depths of religious belonging,” said Eisen. “That they too live in the presence of God and therefore they have kinship with him. And these encounters reinforce one another and grow in him this sense of a mystery beyond any tradition’s capacity to fully understand it.” Eisen adds that Heschel’s conviction that we have something important to learn from other traditions is one of the most important things he’s learned.
 - *Do you feel kinship with believers from other traditions? Why or why not?*
 - *What do you think Heschel means when he says that we have something to learn from other traditions? What influence, if any, have other traditions had on your own experience of faith?*

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*He spoke as a prophet might.
He spoke with certainty born
of faith.*

Arnold Eisen

*The opposite of good is not evil,
it is indifference.*

Abraham Joshua Heschel

- 7.** The interfaith model set out by Heschel skillfully navigates the challenge of maintaining deep roots in a specific religious tradition while reaching out to those similarly rooted in a different tradition. Eisen describes Heschel’s approach: “With humility we listen to God as best we can and do God’s work in the world as best we can along with others who likewise feel compelled to do God’s work in the world. . . . It summons us to action without giving us the security of ultimate truth.”
- *How important is the concept of “ultimate truth” within your tradition? To you personally?*
 - *How do you respond to Heschel’s interfaith model? Do you think it’s possible to maintain deep roots in your own tradition while reaching out to those in a different tradition? Why or why not?*
- 8.** In the face of violence and injustice, Heschel said, “Some are guilty but all are responsible.” Eisen says that, for Heschel, living a life of religious integrity meant being constantly aware of the transaction between the suffering of others and our own freedoms and joys.
- *How do you understand the distinction Heschel makes between guilt and responsibility?*
 - *To what degree do you feel responsible for the suffering around you—locally, nationally, internationally? Do you feel obligated to mitigate suffering? How?*
- 9.** Heschel believed that words were extraordinarily powerful. His daughter, Susannah, recalls her father saying that the Holocaust started with language and propaganda, not guns and tanks. “‘Words create worlds,’ he used to tell me when I was a child.” Eisen points out that this idea that words translate into reality is one that comes from a line in a daily Jewish prayer: “Blessed is God who spoke and the world came into being.”
- *What other examples come to mind—from your own life or from current events—in which “words create worlds”? Describe.*
 - *How might words be used to create life-giving worlds, rather than destructive worlds? What examples come to mind?*

The Spiritual Audacity of Abraham Joshua Heschel

Notes



Resources

For additional resources about this topic, review Program Details at <http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/heschel/index.shtml>