**Tribute by Professor Elèna Mortara,**

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# Ed Kaplan: Reminiscences from Italy

**1979-2007**

It was in the fall of 1979—foliage season in the area around Brandeis University—that Ed Kaplan and I first met. He had recently started teaching French literature at Brandeis, and I was there as a young research scholar of American literature coming from Italy, thanks to a Fulbright grant, for a research period that I was to spend first at Brandeis and then in New York, at Columbia. We were both professionally working in the field of literature, my field of studies being Anglo-American literature, yet it was not this common literary interest, nor our parallel engagement with texts written in a language different from our native one, that led to our first meeting and the beginning of our friendship. What created our connection was our common devotion to the works and the memory of Abraham Joshua Heschel, the well-known Jewish philosopher and religious thinker of Hasidic descent, originally from Warsaw, who had emigrated to America in 1940 and had become a prophetic voice speaking for the renewal of Jewish life in the modern world, in the name of a living tradition. In the late sixties and early seventies, I had translated into Italian (in some cases in cooperation with my mother, Lisa Mortara) some of Heschel's most important English works—*God in Search of Man*, *Man Is Not Alone*, *Who Is Man?*, *The Sabbath*—and I had also had the fortune to meet Heschel personally on his visits to Italy and to be his interpreter in his Italian tour of lectures throughout Italy, in Turin, Milan and Rome. After Heschel's

untimely death, I had remained in touch with his wife, Sylvia Heschel, and with their daughter Susannah, whom I had also gotten to know on one of their Italian visits. And it was thanks to Sylvia Heschel that, in that fall of 1979, I became acquainted with a young scholar of French literature, whom she appreciated greatly for his kindness and seriousness, who was working on her husband's manuscripts and was teaching at Brandeis. When she heard I would spend the first part of my research period at this university, she advised me to get in touch with Edward Kaplan, and prompted our connection.

This is how our friendship started, many years ago. Since then, a strong friendship developed between us, continuously renewed through occasional messages and encounters on either side of the Atlantic. Ed kept me informed about his studies and achievements, and from time to time sent me pictures about his wonderful growing family. His many years of intense research on Heschel came to a climax in the 1990s, when he first condensed his deep understanding of this spiritual prophet—a guide for him and many others in our generation—in his wonderful study, *Holiness in Words: Abraham Joshua Heschel's Poetics of Piety* (1996), a masterpiece of interpretation. This important work (published that same year also in France) was followed two years later, in 1998, by the publication of the first volume of Heschel's biography, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Prophetic Witness*, coauthored by him with Rabbi Samuel H. Dresner, while the second and final volume of this impressive biography, *Spiritual Radical: Abraham Josha Heschel in America*, written by Edward K. Kaplan alone, and also published by Yale University Press, came out in 2007. Meanwhile, Ed's well written and documented introduction to an English translation of Heschel's collection of poems published in Warsaw in 1933, *Der Shem Hameforash: Mentsh: Lider*, translated from the Yiddish by Morton M. Leifman and published by Continuum, with the title *The Ineffable Name of God: Man: Poems*, in 2004, had contributed to the appreciation of a little-known facet of Heschel's literary production—his primary poetic impulse, a hidden side of this writer's complex personality.

2007, when Heschel's monumental "cultural and intellectual" biography by Edward Kaplan was completed, was the year of Heschel's centenary, variously celebrated in the United States and other parts of the world. I also took the initiative of a conference in honour of Heschel in Italy. The conference, entitled "Between Heaven and Earth: Abraham Joshua Heschel Centennial," was sponsored by the University of Rome "Tor Vergata" and its Roman Center of Studies on Judaism (CeRSE, Centro Romano di Studi sull'Ebraismo), in cooperation with the Cardinal Bea Center at the Pontifical Gregorian University, the Center for Jewish Culture of the Jewish Community of Rome, and the Institute of the Italian Encyclopaedia, in whose beautiful, historical site in the center of Rome the event took place. Two scholars and long-time friends of mine came over from the United States for this event: Susannah Heschel, who concluded this conference with a wonderful, inspiring talk on "The Inner Life of Abraham Joshua Heschel", and Edward Kaplan, who opened the colloquium with an engaging paper entitled "A Spiritual Radical in America: Mysticism and Moral Courage." In this, as in other events, I could appreciate Ed's scholarly seriousness, combined with his great human graciousness and modesty.

**2008-2024**

The following years also provided occasions for meetings and further contacts. In 2009, Edward K. Kaplan's first book on Heschel, *Holiness in Words*, was translated into Italian as *La santità nelle parole: Abraham Joshua Heschel. Poetica, devozione, azione*, on the initiative of Gianluca Giannini, and this gave rise to a series of stimulating conversations between Ed and me over his text and its translation, conversations which continued by email in the following year as well.

In 2011, I went to Boston to take part in a roundtable on Philip Roth, organized by the Philip Roth Society at the American Literature Association annual conference. At that time, I had just been given the task of editing the most prestigious Italian edition of

Roth's works, in the "Meridiani Mondadori" series. There was no time on my part for long extra meetings, and I remember Ed's kindness in giving me a ride to the airport on my departure back to Italy, so that we could have a final chat. That same year, I wrote a long English essay on a subject of common interest, "Buried Truth, Hidden Sources: I. Bashevis Singer, A. J. Heschel and the Kotzker Rebbe", for the Italian Americanist journal *Letterature d'America* (XXXI, nn. 136-137), which I sent him to read in advance before its publication, receiving generous and helpful comments.

Shortly later, Ed received the prestigious invitation to teach a course, in the spring of 2012, at the Cardinal Bea Centre for Judaic Studies of the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. He told me proudly about this public recognition of his work, which he took not only as an honour for himself and Brandeis University, but also, he wrote me, "as an extraordinary intellectual and spiritual opportunity"—*intellectual* and *spiritual* being two key words in Ed's vocabulary. In April and May 2012, he therefore came to Rome, the city where I live, giving a course at the Pontifical Gregorian University on Abraham Joshua Heschel and Thomas Merton, two of the religious thinkers who influenced his spiritual life and whose work he studied earnestly. Merton, the American Catholic monk who was the author, among dozens of other books, of the essay *No Man Is an Island* (1955), and Heschel, who wrote the inspiring essay *No Religion Is an Island* (1966), advocating the importance of interfaith cooperation for justice and peace, are two spiritual leaders and thinkers loved by Ed Kaplan, that can help us suggest some of his main spiritual concerns—the concerns of a sensitive, questioning man in search of meaning, profoundly aware of the need for a moral life, for radical commitment, and interreligious dialogue. This stay in Rome was the occasion for other meetings and conversations of ours, and for a beautiful encounter with his wife Janna and their son Aaron. The warm Shabbat dinner we spent together at my beloved nephew and niece's home by the Tiber river, soon after their arrival, is a special memory, long cherished by all of us.

After his official retirement from Brandeis in 2015, Ed, as testified by all his colleagues, continued to give much time to his university and continued his engagement with his studies. That year, I published a book, *Writing for Justice: Victor Séjour, the Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara, and the Age of Transatlantic Emancipations*, which came out in a series of American transnational studies at Dartmouth College Press and was awarded the 2016 American Studies Network Book Prize in Europe. Ed generously reviewed this book for the *Review of Rabbinic Judaism*. I was moved by his beautiful, deep review, which he wrote and sent me in 2016 but was published in 2017. I was impressed by the way he was able to focus all the main points of the book, in such a clear and effective way. In 2018, he kindly sent me another review of my book written by Sarah H. Mosher, which had come out in what he called the "fundamental" journal of his profession, *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*: "*You have really created a magnificent book*" (with italics in the original) was his comment, accompanying this very complimentary review, where my "interdisciplinary" book was described as a "seamless and exceptionally original study." In that letter of May 06, 2018, Ed enquired about my "Philip Roth project" and announced me that he was preparing a one-volume abridgement of his two-volume biography of Abraham Joshua Heschel. In my answer, I updated him about my recent trip to London for a conference of the European Association for American Studies, where I had enjoyed spending some time with our common friend Steve Whitfield, and about my participation in the Association for Jewish Studies (AJS) annual Conference in Washington of December 2017, where Susannah Heschel had kindly promoted a panel on my book *Writing for Justice*. I also told him about the following event which had taken place on my way back from Washington to Italy, with my stop in New York and my wonderful meeting with Philip Roth at his home on December 21, 2017. Just a few days after this exchange, the whole world would be saddened by the unexpected news of Roth's death, after an operation, on May 22, 2018.

Edward K. Kaplan's one-volume biography of Abraham Joshua Heschel came out in 2019. Published by The Jewish Publication Society and titled *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Mind, Heart, Soul*, this was his last book. Ed announced this accomplishment to me in October, with three different messages sent on the same day, October 23. In one of these e-mail messages, he also included an attached French interview to him by Ruth Scheps, titled "Abraham Heschel. Une conscience prophétique. Entretien avec Edward Kaplan" (i.e. "Abraham Heschel: A Prophetic Conscience. Interview with Edward Kaplan"), published in June 2019 in the French journal *Mikhtav Hadash* (subtitle: *La nouvelle lettre. Réflexion pour un Judaïsm ouvert*, i.e, "The New Letter. Reflection for an Open Judaism"). This interview, where Edward Kaplan opens his heart, revealing the spiritual search that brought him to know Abraham J. Heschel, offers a synthesis of Ed's spiritual and scholarly legacy. It constitutes one of his last messages to the world.

Yet that was not his last public statement. Ed's last most significant message to the world is probably the testimonial he contributed to the Heschel web portal of the Jewish Theological Seminary only a few months before he died – a short, beautiful text, which begins by recalling the effect of his first meeting and reading Heschel in 1965 ("for the first time in my life I found a Jewish writer who convincingly evoked the presence of God") and which is eventually concluded by this statement (in italics in the original): "*his ultimate message is profound yet simple to grasp: Whatever the yearning is that throbs within us—whether or not we call it the Holy Spirit—it is our responsibility to make it live.*" It was this yearning and this sense of responsibility that animated Ed's life.

**2025. Conclusions**

I loved the gentle manner of my friend Ed Kaplan, his sweetness, his thoughtfulness and sensibility. And I appreciated his scholarly achievements, the seriousness of his research, his joining literary studies with a personal spiritual search, and, last but not

least, our main common ground: his life-long dedication to Abraham Joshua Heschel's thought. I loved his mental and emotional responsiveness to the way a spiritual experience can be communicated by the beauty of language, his stress on Heschel's notions of "radical amazement" and "holiness in words," his openness to the teachings of "the most prominent traditional Jew in the United States committed to civil rights and political protest" in the 1960s (as Ed stated in his introduction to *Holiness in Words*), his ability to show in his study of this master how his eloquent, "emotionally charged" literary style is used in the service of his readers' spiritual transformation and maturity.

I miss Ed, I miss his friendship, his intelligence and understanding. This year 2025, when I told Janna Kaplan, his wife, that I have just co-edited a book which concerns a delicate issue in the Jewish-Christian dialogue and am involved in a series of events connected to that, her comment was: "How excited Ed would have been, and how eager to read it at once!" Yes, I know this is true. Now, it is comforting to know that Ed's engagement in interfaith dialogue will be celebrated annually by the establishment of an Interfaith Lectureship in his honour, which will hopefully contribute to the advancement of interreligious dialogue, something essential for the sake of humanity.

23 December, 2025