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## *Remembering Ed Kaplan*

It can sound trite to speak of someone as a kindred spirit or a friend of the soul. Yet that is how I came to perceive Ed Kaplan. Our conversations, carried out predominantly by email with a few memorable in-person meetings, were energising and always interesting: dialogue at its best, and which I can only describe as happening 'beneath the surface'. He was a consummate and generous listener. Never did I experience Ed as opinionated or arrogant, but as someone who wanted more than anything to try to know, understand and make important connections. Further on in our friendship, he would ask my opinion on various textual references, wondering if something might, for instance, be supersessionist by stealth, and he discussed certain theological conundrums, especially those centred around Christology. Any thought or suggested edit with which he agreed was credited. At the root of our collaborative efforts, including a project connected with his work at the Cardinal Bea Centre, was a concern for interfaith.

I first met Ed while on a small International Thomas Merton Society group retreat at the Cistercian abbey in Trappist, Kentucky (USA) where Thomas Merton had lived as a monk and was buried. I had read much of Ed's work on Abraham Joshua Heschel, along with his articles and papers on Thomas Merton. Both men had expressed admiration

for one another, with Merton saying of Heschel, '*He knows God!*' and had shared a relatively short but intense correspondence at the time of the drafting of Chapter IV – the 'Jewish Chapter' – of the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate.* They had one face-to-face meeting at Merton's abbey at a critical juncture in the document's troubled history. At the time of our meeting, Ed had just completed his academic tenure as Visiting Professor at the Cardinal Bea Institute for Judaic Studies in Rome, which had been framed around Heschel and Merton, and it was clear from the enthusiasm with which he spoke that the experience had energised him.

Having such interests in common (including a love of French culture and language) would seem to augur well for such an encounter, but it doesn't always follow. What singled Ed out was an innate capacity for equal and respectful dialogue – speaking *to*, not *at* – and a gift for deep listening. He was as interested in conjecture as agreement and unafraid of altering his view of someone or something if a convincing argument should prove it worthy of revision. During that weekend, we met three times – the first was brief, a semi-formal exchange, the next came about by opting out of a group walk in the Kentucky hills (he was concerned that the countryside harboured ticks), and the final meeting meant missing the Evening Office of Compline.

During that final conversation at the abbey, Ed remembered the early days of getting to know Heschel when he was a young doctoral student. He spoke of wanting a proper theological discussion when all Heschel seemed to want to talk about was the war in Vietnam. Only later did he realise that what Heschel was agonising over *was* doing theology. He remembered Heschel with deep affection ('I loved the guy!' he suddenly exclaimed at one point) and credited him with reviving and deepening his own Jewish faith. *Man is not Alone* would, for him, be the first Jewish book he had ever read which convincingly evoked God's presence.

When I asked what had made him wish to parallel Heschel and Merton, he responded by saying, 'Because both were God-centred, both were mystics fully integrated in their

own traditions and both could traverse those traditions without losing their own rootedness.' He saw Heschel and Merton as 'messengers of hope' and considered both men as examples of interfaith dialogue at its most articulate. Merton's posing of the question: 'how do we pass from communication to communion?' summed up, for him, the essential challenge facing anyone serious about confronting and bridging confessional divides necessary for reaching authentic understanding.

Through the years, Ed shared news of his family – both joyful and sad and often accompanied by photos. During a brief meeting in Paris where a conference of the *Société des Études Juives* was being held, he took out his phone and showed me a wonderful collection of recent family photos with proud commentary. He spoke of his love of France but of feeling distracted by missing his wife, Janna and their family and wanting, really, to return home soon. It would be the last time we would meet in person.

7 January, 2026