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Knowing Ed Kaplan: Three Memories and a Story

First Memory: Brandeis University, Abraham Joshua Heschel

I first met Ed when I was a graduate student in Jewish Studies at Brandeis in the early 1990s. He was a professor of French literature there who had a strong interest in Judaism and was working on what became a two-volume biography of Abraham Joshua Heschel, whom he knew as a graduate student at Columbia.

Working on the first volume of Heschel's early life in Europe, Ed asked me if I would be willing to translate from *Pinkasim* (memory books of Polish towns) for his research on pre-war Poland. He also asked me to look through the works of the Novominsker Rebbe who was a relative of the Heschel family. I agreed to do so and thus began our relationship.

One interesting note about that time is that in the back of one of the Novominsker's books there was a list of the dynasty, each one listed as a "Hasidic rebbe" or a "Rosh Yeshiva" etc. Next to Abraham Joshua Heschel it simply read "*Hoker Torani*" (Torah scholar), an interesting locution in the Hasidic world.

Second Memory: Bardstown Kentucky and Boulder Colorado,

Zalman Schachter Shalomi and Thomas Merton

Some years later, I was a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary and Ed and I planned a conference on Thomas Merton, a figure we both venerated. The plan was for the conference to be at the Gethsemani Trappist Monastery in Bardstown, Kentucky. We ended up having to do it in Louisville instead. We invited Zalman

Schachter-Shalomi, who knew Merton and corresponded with him, to attend the conference. Zalman was too sick at the time to travel, and so Ed and I went to Boulder to conduct a video interview with Zalman about his relationship with Merton. We were both attending a conference in Denver at the time. We brought along two colleagues, Pinhas Giller and Elliot Wolfson.

We did a two-hour interview with Zalman in the basement of his home, which was simply amazing. Ed and I peppered Zalman with questions about Merton and his experience visiting the monastery in the 1950s. A small snippet was uploaded on YouTube, and the entire interview is now in my possession.

Ed had a great idea. Zalman had kept all the letters he *received* from Merton, but he had not made copies of the letters he *sent* to Merton (those were days before copy machines). Ed went into the Merton archives in Bardstown and collected copies of all Zalman's letters to Merton, and when we arrived at Zalman's house, we gave them to him as a gift. One cannot imagine the surprise and smile on Zalman's face, having no record of his side of the correspondence. I assume they are in the Zalman archives in CU-Boulder.

Third Memory: Harvard Divinity School: Ed's Books and Recordings,

Martin Buber and Thomas Merton

After Ed's passing, I received a message from Janna that she was moving and asked if I wanted any of Ed's books or recorded material. I quickly said "yes" and went to the house to see what was there. In their living room were four or five boxes of Ed's books by Buber and Merton, and a few boxes of videos and cassette tapes of Merton. Of course, I took them all and went back to my office to arrange the material. The books included many of Buber's published works, including a few gems, such as a first edition of the original translation of *I and Thou* by Ronald Gregory Smith from 1937. There were many of Merton's books and copies of the annual *Merton Journal*, including a wonderful volume, *Beholding Paradise: The Photographs of Thomas Merton* (more on that below).

Partially because of that inheritance, I decided to teach a graduate seminar at Harvard Divinity School, fall 2025, on Buber and Merton, and I conveyed to the students what I had received from Ed and why that inspired the course. In preparation for the sessions, I had many hours reading Ed's volumes by Buber and Merton that included extensive marginalia from his hand. I almost felt like we were reading Buber and Merton together. It was a macabre but also a very pleasant experience for me. I felt like we were in *havruta*.

Coda: A Buddhist/Hasidic story

There was one student in the seminar, who also works in the HDS library, who is a great fan of Merton. He came to my office to talk about his paper. I showed him the box of recorded material of Merton I inherited from Ed, and we decided we would try to get the Harvard library to digitize the Merton recordings and make them available through the library in Ed's name. This work is in process.

During our meeting, I noticed he picked up the book of Merton photographs off the shelf and was looking through it. I said to him, "take it." He looked up quizzically. I said again, "take the book, it seems like you really like it." He was kind of shocked; it is a big expensive volume. He sheepishly nodded and put the book in his bag, thanking me profusely. When he left, I thought. "Ed would have done something similar to me many years ago."

Two weeks later, another student from the seminar came to my office to talk about his final paper. After our conversation, he said, "I really enjoyed the course, and I wanted to give you something as a token of my appreciation." He reached into his bag and took out...a copy of the exact same book I had given the previous student two weeks ago! I told him the story, and we both smiled. Teacher to student – student to teacher. Heschel would have smiled, Buber would have smiled, Merton would have smiled. Ed would have smiled too.

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