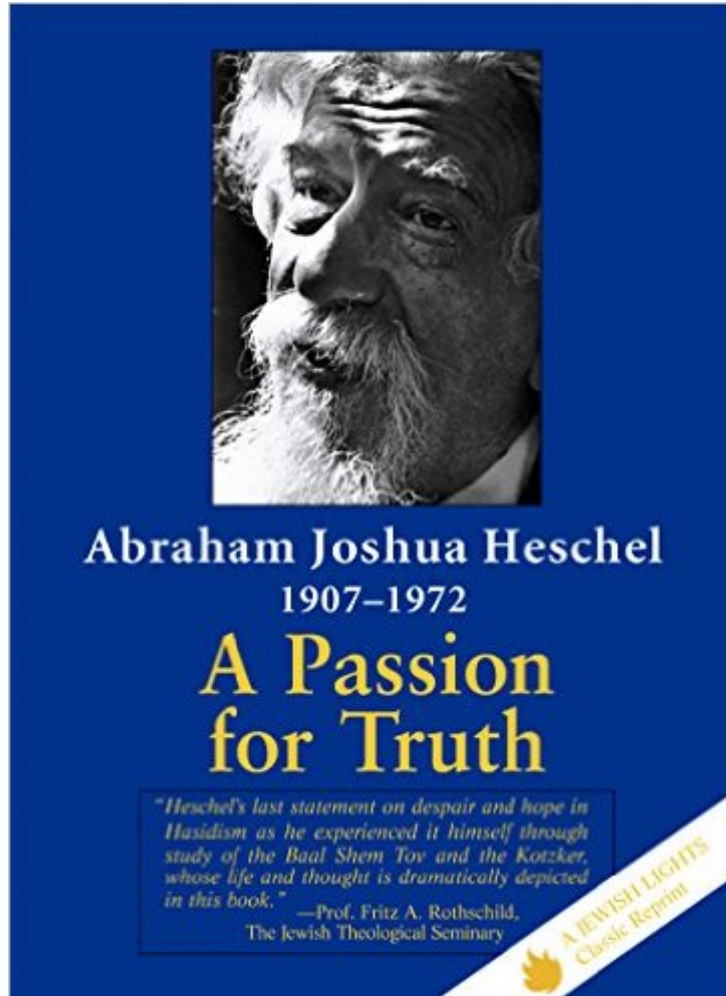


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A Passion For Truth (Jewish Lights Classic Reprint)



Synopsis

It is comparatively easy to preach joy and fervor, but to demand Truth is like shaping marble without tools. And so [the Kotzker] went looking for a few surging people and called loudly upon their souls to bend their conceit and see the Truth beneath the soil.... This was not a philosophical inquiry into the nature of Truth but a scrutiny of men's lives in relation to Truth. Religion, the Kotzker maintained, was not simply an act of adopting a system of beliefs and certain modes of conduct; test and trial were needed, and one had to ascertain through introspection whether one's beliefs were genuine or not, and whether one acted out Truth or lived a life of pretense.... Kierkegaard made it his task to reintroduce Christianity into Christendom. • The Kotzker sought to reintroduce authenticity to Jewish life. Kierkegaard's posthumous impact has been powerful. But has the Kotzker affected Jewish self-understanding? •from A Passion for Truth

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The book analyses the thoughts of the Kotzker Rebbe by contrasting and comparing him to the Danish theologian and philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard. Few men could ever have conceived and written such an incisive work; no one else could have approached it with such an inner feel for the Hasidic tradition and yet, with a mind open to the teachings of Christian theologians. Every thought resonates with Heschel's major "popular" statements of religion and Jewish philosophy, "God in Search of Man", and "Man is not Alone". It is obvious from reading this work that Heschel's own philosophy drew heavily on the Kotzker Rebbe's teachings - strip away the adornments and seek

the essence and truth. It is quite unfortunate that Heschel's major work on the Kotzker was never translated from the original Yiddish. Until such translation is published, this book alone provides both an incisive look at theological radicalism and a sense of the misdirection of most modern theories of religion.

This book is built around two sets of comparison. In the first the Baal Shem Tov is compared to Menahem Mendel of Kotzk. The sharp contrasts between the two are highlighted. The Baal Shem came to the world to bring it light and blessing. He raised the spirits of the disheartened and depressed Jewish people, and gave them a new hope, a new sense of joy, a new sense of their own value a new sense of their love of God and God's love of them. The Kotzker came into the world in search of truth. The expansive generous all - inclusive spirit of the Baal Shem is contradicted by the harsh truth- seeking sarcastic and often bitter soul of the Kotzker. As the Baal Shem opens worlds the Kotzker closes them. The Baal Shem spread joy and the Kotzker lived the last twenty years of his life in the seclusion of his own depression and disappointment. The second part of the book compares the Kotzker with Kierkegaard. Putting doctrinal Jewish and Christian differences aside Heschel focuses on the great similarities between these two truth- seekers. Sarcastic at times, filled with irony towards themselves and humanity they each in his own way seek a religion of Truth. They both seek a religion of higher purity. Kierkegaard condemns Christendom as making little room for the true individual inward subjective Christian- the Kotzker cuts himself off from the masses seeking his guidance, and searches for truth by himself alone. These two individuals each of whom praises a kind of solitude and solitary quest for truth set themselves apart from the mass of mankind. Kierkegaard's renunciation of ordinary married life, his rejection of his fiancée Regina , are paralleled by the Kotzker's withdrawal into his own study away from the ways of the world. Still there are strong differences between the two. The Kotzker does not deny the importance of family life, is not devoid of friends and supporters. Still what fascinates Heschel is the integrity of the two truth- seekers, their uncompromising search to find the true way in worship of God. Heschel writes this book with astounding clarity and beauty. It is clear in his largely loving tone to all the major figures that he himself bears the Hasidic spirit of his grandfather , the Apter Rebbe, who was called 'The Lover of Israel'. I found this to be a profound study which at the same time was clear and beautiful. A holy book from a holy writer.

This book is primarily about the Kotzker Rebbe- a man who wrote nothing that has survived him, and whose personality is primarily known through a few brief sayings. At the beginning of the book,

Heschel claims that the Kotzker is somehow relevant to the Holocaust. The Kotzker was apolitical and spent much of his life in solitude, while Heschel was a prolific writer and champion of social reform. What could the two have in common? And how could a hermit-like thinker's focus on the individual soul be relevant to an international catastrophe? One answer is that the Kotzker was focused on shaking people out of their complacency; he believed that even seemingly pious Hasidim were too self-satisfied, too focused on self-interest rather than on avoiding spiritual stagnation. Similarly, Heschel, writing over a century later, was concerned that Jews were forgetting the atrocities of recent decades. Another is that he emphasized the incomprehensibility of God, an understandable theme after the Holocaust. One Kotzker saying (presumably paraphrased by the author): "A God whom any Tom, Dick and Harry could comprehend, I would not believe in." Heschel also contrasts the Kotzker with Kierkegaard, an equally grim Christian thinker. The major difference between the two seems to be that Kierkegaard was more ascetic in his writings, disdaining sex and reproduction. By contrast, even the most ascetic Jewish thinkers believed in Genesis' commandment to be fruitful and multiply.

There are a lot of books about Chasidism, but not about this interesting character. In "A Passion for Truth", Abraham Joshua Heschel shows the deep and intricate personality of one of the most significant Chasidic Rabbis: Menajem Mendl of Kotzk. One of the most important things in this book is the link that Heschel establishes between the Kotzker Rebbe and the Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard. Throughout this amazing book, Heschel shows the semblance and differences of these two important figures of the Nineteen-century. "A Passion for Truth" is a book that everyone who wants to know about Chasidism and the Kotzker-trend system has to read.

As much autobiographical as it is a biographical search for the dual roots of Hasidism, the reader is taken with the Baal Shem Tov to the forest to read poetry to bears and birds in one breath and then to the brooding existentialism of Rebbe Mendl where nothing matters more than speaking the truth, no matter what. Heschel's A Passion for Truth is a work of art.

This book examines the accounts of two men one a Jewish Rabbi and one a Christian theologian message which calls attention to apathy and a lack contrition in not seeking Truth and an intimate relationship with God allows the reader to examine the intricacies of faith and the societal downfall of mankind to present day.

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