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THE PROPHETS*

By Abraham Joshua Heschel

“What drove me to study the prophets?

“In the academic environment in which I spent my student years philosophy had become an isolated, self-subsisting, self-indulgent entity, a *Ding an sich*, encouraging suspicion instead of love of wisdom. The answers offered were unrelated to the problems. . . . I was slowly led to the realization that some of the terms, motivations, and concerns which dominate our thinking may prove destructive of the roots of human responsibility and treasonable to the ultimate ground of human solidarity.”

Justice & Righteousness

While ancient societies most highly valued wisdom, wealth, and power, to the prophets “such infatuation was ludicrous and idolatrous.” For them, kindness, justice, and righteousness were the highest ideals and actions.

For the prophets, justice was the supreme manifestation of God. This was not simply because it was right for the individual, both the dispenser and the recipient, but because of the link between justice and world history: justice will decide social survival and success. “For accomplishing His grand design, God needs the help of man.”

Justice, then, is not important as an abstraction or value but for practical effects on people. Thus the prophets were preoccupied not so much with the ideal of justice but with the practical applications of injustice and oppression. Most of their activity was to interfere in situations which, while not concerning them personally, they regarded as instances of injustice. “The prophet is a person who is not tolerant of wrongs done to others, who resents other people's injuries.”

Distrust of Power

“The prophet was an individual who said No to his society, condemning its habits and assumptions, its complacency, waywardness, and syncretism.”

The prophets rejected human works and powers as objects of “supreme adoration.” Heschel argues that “the end of public authority is to realize moral law,” and that the principal polemic of the prophets was “denunciation and distrust of power in all its forms and guises.”

* Excerpts from *The Prophets*, Vol. I (New York: Harper Torchbooks, c. 1962, 1969).

For the prophets, war was not only immoral but absurd, that is, not connected with any positive outcome for human life.

Isaiah saw “man's false sense of sovereignty” as the basis for all evil. From the idea of being master and mastery, come “pride, arrogance, and presumption.”

The prophets were iconoclasts, attacking the established institutions and ideologies, and their main proponents. They exposed the pretension, fraud, and illusion of their society. The hallmarks of the prophet are defiance and challenge.

The prophetic message always began with a recital of horrors and ended with a vision of hope and redemption.

Heschel notes that while the prophets used language that can be described as emotional and imaginative, poetic, it didn't reflect “inner harmony or poise” but was marked by “agitation, anguish, and a spirit of nonacceptance.” His goal wasn't self-expression but communication: “His images must not shine, they must burn . . . wrenching one's conscience from the state of suspended animation.”

Intolerance

One repeated theme in Heschel's writing about the prophets is their intolerance. It can be seen as an unwillingness to “extenuate the culpability of man.” In effect, they refused to compromise on the issue of response-ability. Heschel goes so far as to say that the prophets violated their own standards of justice by making sweeping allegations that were “unfair” to the people of Israel because they “defied standards of accuracy.” But he also notes that they were concerned not with facts *per se* but their meaning: “defining truth as reality reflected in a mind, we see prophetic truth as reality reflected in God's mind, the world *sub specie dei*. The key idea here is that “the prophets remind us of the moral state of the people: Few are guilty, but all are responsible.”

Love & Compassion

Heschel balances the picture of the prophets as hard and intolerant with their characteristic “love and compassion for mankind,” repeating the point that the prophetic message always began with doom but ended with hope.

Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah, Micah and Isaiah

Heschel proposes that for Amos “There is a living God who cares. Justice is more than an idea or a norm. Justice is a divine concern.”

And Hosea's God: “The Lord is in love with Israel, but he also has a passionate love of right and a burning hatred of wrong.” Hosea sees the relationship between God and Israel as akin to marriage. His aim isn't to celebrate that fact but rather to perfect the relationship.

And what does the Lord require of you,
But to do justice, and to love kindness,
And to walk humbly with your God?

—Micah

Hosea's main complaint was that the people didn't know God. Heschel points out that “to know” involves both cognition and emotions, as well an

act “involving concern, inner engagement, dedication, or attachment to a person”—in this case, God.

Isaiah’s conflict with the civil authority of the king was based on his conviction that state policy should follow from moral conviction. Heschel states: “The prophet who saw history as the stage for God’s work, where kingdoms and empires rise for a time and vanish, perceived a design beyond the mists and shadows of the moment.” He was distressed that the people “looked to weapons” rather than God. He was critical of all forms of worldly power-building, such as military alliances with foreign states, as means to influence history. Heschel notes: “Isaiah could not accept politics as a solution, since politics itself, with its arrogance and disregard of justice, was a problem. When mankind is, as we would say, spiritually sick, something more radical than political sagacity is needed to solve the problem of security.”

Isaiah targets the moral corruption of leaders as the most important factor undermining the relationship between God and the people of Israel.

Heschel describes Jeremiah’s calling in terms of “sympathy” for God. He had a “blazing . . . emotional intensity,” to inspire and impassion people with understanding of God. The result was self-isolation for Jeremiah:

I did not sit in the company of merrymakers,
Nor did I rejoice;
I sat alone, because Thy hand was upon me,
For Thou hadst filled me with indignation.
—Jeremiah 15:17(115)

While the prophet sought to escape his calling, his experience was so intense as to be unavoidable. As Heschel puts it, “the prophetic sympathy was stronger than the will, the inner passion more powerful than the personal disposition.” Heschel concludes that Jeremiah “hated his prophetic mission. To a soul full of love, it was horrible to be a prophet of castigation and wrath.”

In spite of the pain and misery associated with the prophetic role that he hated, Heschel shows that Jeremiah understood why he couldn’t escape his calling. There was in him deep feeling for both divine and human pathos, and thus he was pained by injustice and human suffering respectively. “He was a person overwhelmed by sympathy for God and sympathy for man.”

Heschel states that Jeremiah’s anger and indignation were easily seen by others as personal hostility: “He who loved his people, whose life was dedicated to saving his people, was regarded as an enemy. . . . Jeremiah was gentle and compassionate by nature, and the mission he had to carry out was, to him, distasteful in the extreme.”

Fanaticism

Heschel argues that “if such deep sensitivity to evil is to be called hysterical, what name should be given to the abysmal indifference to evil which the prophet bewails?”

Historical Pantheism

According to Heschel, the prophets didn’t believe that history and God were one in the same, or that whatever happens on earth reflects the will of God.

They viewed God as not fully knowable, mysterious, but revealed when defied, that is, when injustice prevailed. The impact of God in history,

then, is not in the form of ongoing process but “involvement” at the moment of “extraordinary events.”

History, for the prophets, was the playing out of power placed by God in human hands. But for the prophets, the central historical markers are not victory and defeat but the rise or fall of moral conviction and action the precursor of national ascendancy or decline. The prophets were far from certain that civilization would continue.

“By history we do not mean the ‘gone’ or the dead past, but the present in which past and future are interlocked. Sin is repudiation of history. Sacred events, sacred moments are commitments. The conscience stands still, but commitments go on. “Life is not as fate designs, nor is history a realm to be tyrannized by man. Events are not like rocks on the shore shaped by wind and water. God is at work on man, intent to fashion history in accord with Himself. . . .

“The tragic sense in man interprets a catastrophe as that which has to be, that which is fated to be. . . .

“In contrast, Jeremiah was told: ‘If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will repent of the evil that I intended to do to it. . . .’

“Sin is not a cul de sac, nor is guilt a final trap. Sin may be washed away by repentance and return, and beyond guilt is the dawn of forgiveness. The door is never locked, the threatened doom is not the last word.

“Ultimately there is only one will by which history is shaped: the will of God; and there is only one factor upon which the shape of history depends: the moral conduct of the nations.”

“The presence of God in history, the manifestation of His will in the affairs of the world, is the object of the prophet's longing. It is not mystical experience he yearns for in the night, but historical justice. Mystical experience is the illumination of an individual; historical justice is the illumination of all men, enabling the inhabitants of the world to learn righteousness.”

Heschel argues that what the prophets discovered is that “history is a nightmare.” Yet, he goes on to say, “it is an act of evil to accept the state of evil as either inevitable or final.” The prophets weren't immobilized because they had both a moral vision and conviction about the human capacity for repentance. Thus for them history wasn't a “blind alley”—the power of God (moral conviction and action) was always potentially present as a source of redemption.

Isolation

According to Heschel: “The prophet is a lonely man. His standards are too high, his stature too great, and his concern too intense for other men to share. Living on the highest peak, he has no company except God.”

“The two staggering facts in the life of a prophet are: God's turning to him, and man's turning away from him. This is often his lot: to be chosen by God and to be rejected by the people. The word of God, so clear to him, is unintelligible to them.”

Heschel's description of the prophets' lives confirms the loneliness and misery of the classic organizer's role. For the most part they felt “cursed” by their fates. Heschel's characterization emphasizes bitterness born of scorn and reproach, alienation from all, “the wicked as well as the pious,” leading to lifelong loneliness.

“The words used by Jeremiah to describe the impact of God upon his life are identical with the terms for seduction and rape in the legal terminology of the Bible. . . .

“The call to be a prophet is more than an invitation. It is first of all a feeling of being enticed, or acquiescence or surrender. But this winsome feeling is only one aspect of the experience. The other aspect is a sense of being ravished or carried away by violence, of yielding to overpowering force against one's own will. . . .

“A man whose message is doom for the people he loves not only forfeits his own capacity for joy, but also provokes the hostility and outrage of his contemporaries. The sights of woe, the anticipation of disaster, nearly crush his soul.”

Gift of Being Guided

The prophet stands between contemporary society and God. Not simply a messenger of God, Heschel argues that the prophet “stands in the presence of God,” is in “council” with the Lord. Prophecy is not a skill but rather “the gift of being guided and restrained” by God, by a commitment to righteousness—justice, freedom, and peace. In his mission the prophet doesn't argue for God and the good but reveals the connection between them, “the invisible God becomes audible.” Heschel regards the prophet as an “associate” of God rather than an instrument. For Amos, “the good is not apart from God.” In the words of the prophet, “Seek Me and live; . . . Seek good, and not evil, That you may live. . . .” (Amos 5:4, 5:14).

Influence

Heschel argues that while people may not personally heed a prophet's admonitions, they can't remain indifferent to the prophet's existence. In fact, they often felt themselves to be failures. In the words of Jeremiah: “For twenty-three years . . . the word of the Lord has come to me, and I have spoken persistently to you, but you have not listened” (Jer. 25:3).