

Heschel, *The Prophets*, Ch. 3. "Amos"

Under the long and brilliant reign of Jeroboam II (*ca.* 786-746 B.C.E.), the Northern Kingdom, also called the Kingdom of Israel, reached the summit of its material power and prosperity, expanding its territory northward at the expense of Hamath and Damascus, and southward at the expense of Judah. During this entire period Assyria was weak, and Syria on the decline; Jeroboam took advantage of the weakness of both to extend his dominion, foster commerce, and accumulate wealth. When Amos appeared in the North there was pride... plenty, and splendor in the land, elegance in the cities, and might in the palaces... At the same time there was no justice in the land... the poor were afflicted, exploited, even sold into slavery... and the judges were corrupt... Amos was working as a shepherd and dresser of sycamore trees when he was suddenly overwhelmed by God and called to be a prophet. Although his home was in Tekoa, a village southeast of Bethlehem in the Kingdom of Judah, his utterances were all directed against the Kingdom in the North, against Samaria, Bethel, and the rulers of the land.

"The Lord roars from Zion, And utters His voice from Jerusalem; The pastures of the shepherds mourn, And the top of Carmel withers" (Amos 1:2). These words are strange and inexplicable to us. Most of us who care for the world bewail God's dreadful silence, while Amos appears smitten by God's mighty voice. He did not hear a whisper, "a still small voice," but a voice like a lion's roaring that drives shepherd and flock into panic.

What had provoked the anger of the Lord? What had happened to shatter His silence? The answer is given in an account of events that happened in the world of which Amos was a part. Two things stand out in the prophet's condemnation: the absence of loyalty and the absence of pity. Tyre had violated a treaty, "the covenant of brotherhood," and Edom had "pursued his brother with the sword, and cast off all pity, and his anger tore perpetually, and he kept his wrath forever."... He ended with Moab, how they had burned the bones of the king of Edom into lime. This act of vandalism had not even the poor excuse of being profitable: it brought nothing but the gratification of hate (1:3-2:3)...

Yet the nations were not, like Israel, condemned for internal transgressions, but for international crimes, although there was no law in existence governing international relations. Amos, however, presupposes the conception of a law which was not embodied in a contract, the conception of right and wrong which precedes every contract, since all contracts derive their validity from it. Here a conception of law was expressed which was binding for all men, though it was not formally proclaimed; and there was a Lawgiver capable of enforcing it and coercing transgressors. Did Amos speak as a champion of

ethics? Was it in the name of the moral law that the shepherd of Tekoa left his sheep to proclaim his message in Samaria? Amos insisted that it was God whose call he followed and whose living word he carried. There is a living God who cares. Justice is more than an idea or a norm. Justice is a divine concern.

The most beautiful face lends itself to caricature, to a ludicrous exaggeration of some of its features. And the sublime ideas of biblical faith are equally subject to caricature. As examples may be cited the idea of "the people of the Lord"... From the beginnings of Israelite religion the belief that God had chosen this particular people to carry out His mission has been both a cornerstone of Hebrew faith and a refuge in moments of distress. And yet, the prophets felt that to many of their contemporaries this cornerstone was a stumbling block; this refuge, an escape. They had to remind the people that chosenness must not be mistaken as divine favoritism or immunity from chastisement, but, on the contrary, that it meant being more seriously exposed to divine judgment and chastisement.

Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up out of the land of Egypt:

You only have I known / Of all the families of the earth; /*

Therefore I will punish you / For all your iniquities (Amos 3:1-2).

Does chosenness mean that God is exclusively concerned with Israel? Does the Exodus from Egypt imply that God is involved only in the history of Israel and is totally oblivious of the fate of other nations?

Are you not like the Ethiopians to Me, / O people of Israel? says the Lord.

Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, / And the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir? (Amos 9:7)

The nations chosen for this comparison were not distinguished for might and prestige – countries such as Egypt or Assyria – but rather, nations which were despised and disliked. The color of the Ethiopians is black, and in those days many of them were sold on the slave markets. The Philistines were the archenemies of Israel, and the Syrians continued to be a menace to the Northern Kingdom. The God of Israel is the God of all nations, and all men's history is His concern.

Amos tried to convey the sense of disappointment, God's aversion against the people . Indeed, what God demands of man is expressed not only in terms of action, but also in terms of passion. "I hate and abhor your feasts!" (5:21), says God. "Hate evil and love good" (5:15) is the great demand. Is it conceivable that the prophet set forth God's powerful pathos in inner detachment? Does not the very fact of his conveying the pathos

to the people imply an inner identification with it? We know that standing before God, Amos pleaded for the people. What, then, was his feeling when he stood before the people?

Does a lion roar in the forest, / When he has no prey? / Does a young lion cry out from his den / If he has taken nothing? / Does a bird fall in a snare on the earth, / When there is no trap for it? / Does a snare spring up from the ground, / When it has taken nothing? / Is a trumpet blown in a city, / And the people are not afraid? / Does evil befall a city, / Unless the Lord has done it? / Surely the Lord God does nothing, / Without revealing His secret / To His servants the prophets. / The lion has roared; / Who will not fear? / The Lord God has spoken; / Who can but prophesy? (Amos 3:4-8)

Amos, a prophet to whom the call of God came as a surprise and stayed on as dismay, is startled. The voice of God is compared with the roar of a lion about to fall upon its prey; Israel, God's chosen people, is the prey. And no one hears, no one trembles. All save the prophet are deaf and complacent. Yet Amos' reaction is not fear but the inner compulsion to convey what the voice proclaims; not escape for shelter, but identification with the voice...

Amos is so overwhelmed by his inspiration that there is little differentiation in his message between revelation and response. Conveying the word of God, he rarely adds his own word. There is no explicit statement of his sympathy, but only intimations of inner identifications and agreement.

Do two walk together, / Unless they have made an appointment? . . . / Surely the Lord God does nothing, / Without revealing His secret / To His servants the prophets (Amos 3:3, 7).

These lines suggest a relation of intimacy, characteristic of those who are in close contact with one another and who have opened their hearts or their minds to such a degree that they deeply know and understand one another. Intimacy, however, never becomes familiarity. God is the Lord, and the prophets are His servants.

The prophet regards himself as one who walks together with God. God and he have agreed. It is in the light of such sympathy, of such inner identification with the divine disappointment and aversion, that the spirit of Amos can be understood. Amos' compassion for his people is profound. When beholding a vision of how "the Lord God was calling for a judgment by fire... it devoured the land," he prayed for mercy (7:4 ff.). And yet he also identified himself with God's threat of doom for the whole people. This is the burden of a prophet: compassion for man and sympathy for God.