

Heschel's *The Prophets*, ch.4 Hosea

Hosea, 1: 2-9; 2: 2-5; 14-20; 3: 1-5 (Revised Standard Version)

(Ch. 1) When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, "Go, take to yourself a wife of harlotry and have children of harlotry", for the land commits great harlotry by forsaking the LORD.

So he went and took Gomer the daughter of Dibla'im, and she conceived and bore him a son. And the LORD said to him, "Call his name Jezreel; for yet a little while, and I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel...

She conceived again and bore a daughter. And the LORD said to him, "Call her name Not pitied [Lo Ruchamah], for I will no more have pity on the house of Israel"...

When she had weaned Not pitied, she conceived and bore a son. And the LORD said, "Call his name Not my people [Lo Ami], for you are not my people and I am not your God."...

(Ch. 2) "Plead with your mother, plead – for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband – that she put away her harlotry from her face, and her adultery from between her breasts. Lest I strip her naked and make her as in the day she was born, and make her like a wilderness... Upon her children also I will have no pity, because they are children of harlotry. For their mother has played the harlot; she that conceived them has acted shamefully..."

Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. And there I will give her her vineyards, and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt... And I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD"...

(Ch. 3) And the LORD said to me, "Go again, love a woman who is beloved of a paramour and is an adulteress; even as the LORD loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins." So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer and a lethech of barley. And I said to her, "You must dwell as mine for many days; you shall not play the harlot, or belong to another man; so will I also be to you."

For the children of Israel shall dwell many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or teraphim. Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the LORD their God, and David their king; and they shall come in fear to the LORD and to his goodness in the latter days.

The account of this strange incident has been a puzzle to commentators. They have found it morally repugnant that God should have commanded a prophet to marry or even to remarry an adulterous woman. The suggestion has been made, therefore, that the incident took place in a vision or a dream and was never carried out in real life, or that the story was told as a parable or allegory... In addition to the historical and psychological problem, the question of the meaning of the marriage has often been discussed. Some scholars maintain that the purpose of the marriage was to teach through demonstration: to let the people recognize in

this conjugal affair, played out before their gaze, a picture of their own conduct and fate. The impulse to this theory comes from the fact that the prophets of Israel often performed symbolic acts in order to demonstrate dramatically their message to the public.

One thing is clear: the primarily given and immediate spiritual datum in the story of the marriage is the prophet's experience. The event stirred and shocked the life of Hosea regardless of its effect upon public opinion. It concerned him personally at the deepest level and had a meaning of the highest significance for his own life.

As time went by, Hosea became aware of the fact that his personal fate was a mirror of the divine pathos, that his sorrow echoed the sorrow of God. In this fellow suffering as an act of sympathy with the divine pathos the prophet probably saw the meaning of the marriage which he had contracted at the divine behest.

The marriage of Hosea was no symbolic representation of real facts, no act of re-creating or repeating events in the history of Israel or experiences in the inner life of God. Its meaning was not objective, inherent in the marriage, but subjective, evocative. Only by living through in his own life what the divine Consort of Israel experienced, was the prophet able to attain sympathy for the divine situation. The marriage was a lesson, an illustration, rather than a symbol or a sacrament. Its purpose was not to demonstrate divine attitudes to the people, but to educate Hosea himself in the understanding of divine sensibility.

Amos knows God as the selfless and exalted Being Whose sensibilities and concern for justice are painted by the sinful transgressions of Israel. The emotions suggested in his prophecies are not spontaneous. Apart from the active emotion of disdain, these emotions are reactive, provoked by human deeds: resistance and abhorrence leading to rejection... It is Hosea who flashes a glimpse into the inner life of God as He ponders His relationship to Israel. In parables and in lyrical outbursts the decisive motive behind God's strategy in history is declared. The decisive motive is love. God is conceived, not as the self-detached Ruler, but as the sensitive Consort to Whom deception comes and Who nevertheless goes on pleading for loyalty, uttering a longing for a reunion, a passionate desire for reconciliation... Hosea centralizes the various incidental reactions. Where Amos sees episodes, Hosea sees a drama...

The pathos that moved the soul of Hosea possessed, in contrast to its elementary manifestations proclaimed by Amos, a complex structure. He was struck by the whole drama of God's relationship to Israel, a drama composed of various acts and stages. What would have made it possible for Hosea to attain an inner identification with all stages of the divine pathos? A mere knowledge of what has come to pass between God and Israel would have enabled him to have genuine sympathy for the present emotion, the disillusionment, but not for the whole gamut of experience, for all stages of the inner drama that preceded the present. The scope of sympathy is limited. One must share the experiences, or similar experiences, in order to share the emotional reactions to them... Only a revival, one by one, of past happenings, together with the reactions they called forth, would enable the prophet to experience sympathy for the drama. For this purpose, the full story was re-enacted in the personal life of the prophet, and the variety of divine pathos experienced and shared in the privacy of his own destiny: love, frustration, reconciliation.