

Heschel's *The Prophets, Isaiah*

The speech that opens the book of Isaiah, and which sets the tone for all the utterances by this prophet, deals not with the anger, but with the sorrow of God. The prophet pleads with us to understand the plight of a father whom his children have abandoned. "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; / For the Lord has spoken: / Sons have I reared and brought up, / But they have rebelled against Me. / The ox knows its owner / And the ass its master's crib; / But Israel does not know, / My people does not understand" (Isaiah 1: 2-3).

The prophet laments in his own words the children's desertion of their father: "They have forsaken the Lord, / They have despised the Holy One of Israel" (Isaiah 1: 4).

But the sympathy for God's injured love overwhelms his whole being. What he feels about the size of God's sorrow and the enormous scandal of man's desertion of God is expressed in the two lines quoted above which introduced God's lamentation. "Hear, then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also?" (7: 13). In different words addressed to the king, the prophet conveys his impression of the mood of God: As happened in the time of Noah and as is happening again, God's patience and longsuffering are exhausted. He is tired of man. He hates man's homage, his festivals, his celebrations. Man has become a burden and a sorrow for God. "What to Me is the multitude of your sacrifices? / Says the Lord; / I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams / And the fat of fatted beasts; / I do not delight in the blood of bulls, / Or of lambs, or of he-goats. / When you come to appear before Me, / Who requires of you / This trampling of My courts? / Bring no more vain offerings; / Incense is an abomination to Me. / New moon and sabbath and the calling of assemblies / I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. / Your new moons and your appointed feasts / My soul hates; / They have become a burden to Me, That I am weary to bear. / When you spread forth your hands, / I will hide My eyes from you; / Even though you make many prayers, / I will not listen; / Your hands are full of blood" (Isaiah 1: 11-15).

The weariness of God, an important theoretical category in Isaiah's thinking, brings about a greater concealment of His personal involvement in history. It is a time in which divine anger becomes active in history.

There is sorrow in God's anger. It is an instrument of purification, and its exercise will not last forever. "For the Lord will have compassion on Jacob and will again choose Israel, and settle them in their own land, and the stranger shall join himself to them, and will cleave to the house of Jacob" (14: 1). His mercy is not discarded, merely suspended. His anger lasts a moment, it does not endure forever. "In a very little while My indignation will come to an end... / Come, My people, enter your chambers, / And shut your doors behind you, / Hide yourselves for a little while / Until the indignation is past" (Isaiah 10: 25; 26: 20).

Anger is not His disposition, but a state He waits to overcome. "Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you; / Therefore He exalts Himself to show mercy to you. / For the Lord is a God of justice / Blessed are all those who wait for Him" (Isaiah 30: 18).

To Hosea, Israel is God's consort; to Isaiah, God's vineyard... Isaiah's sympathy for God comes to expression in a parable describing the crisis in the relationship between God and Israel.

I will sing of my Friend / The song of this love for His vineyard: / My Friend had a vineyard / On a very fertile hill. / He digged it, He cleared it of stones, / And planted it with choice vines; / He built a tower in the midst of it, / And hewed out a wine press in it; / He looked for it to yield grapes, / But it yielded sour grapes. / And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, / Judge, I pray you, between Me and My vineyard. / What more should I have done for My vineyard, / That I have not done for it? / Wherefore, when I looked for it to yield grapes, / Why did it yield sour grapes? / And now I will tell you / What I will do to My vineyard. / I will remove its hedge, / And it shall be devoured; / I will break down its wall, / And it shall be trampled down... For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts / Is the house of Israel, / And the men of Judah / Are His pleasant planting. / He looked for justice, / But behold, there is violence, / For righteousness, / There is outrage" (Isaiah 5: 1-7).

In this song of the vineyard, the prophet speaks first in his own name (vss. 1-2), then as the voice of God (vss. 3-6), and again in his own name (vs. 7). What personal attitude is reflected in the prophet's words?

It is first the prophet's love of God, Who is called "my Friend" and for Whom he sings "a love song concerning His vineyard". He neither rebukes the people's ingratitude nor bewails their prospect of ruin and disgrace. The prophet's sympathy is for God Whose care for the vineyard had been of no avail. God's sorrow rather than the people's tragedy is the theme of this song. The song contains a gentle allusion to the grief and the disappointment of God. He feels hurt at the thought of abandoning the vineyard He had rejoiced in, and in which He had placed so much hope and care.

"And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, / Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? / Then I said, Here I am! / Send me. And he said, Go, and say to this people: / Hear and hear, but do not understand; / See and see, but do not perceive. / Make the heart of this people fat, / And their ears heavy, / And shut their eyes; / Lest they see with their eyes, / And hear with their ears, / And understand with their hearts, / And turn and be healed. / Then I said, How long, O Lord? / And He said: / Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, / And houses without men... (Isaiah 6).

The mandate Isaiah receives is fraught with an appalling contradiction. He is told to be a prophet in order to thwart and to defeat the essential purpose of being a prophet. He is told to face his people while standing on his head. Did he not question his own faculties of seeing, hearing, and understanding when perceiving such a message? What gave him the certainty that it was God's voice speaking to him? It is generally assumed that the mission of a prophet is to open the people's hearts, to enhance their understanding, and to bring about rather than to prevent their turning to God. Was not Isaiah's entire ministry devoted to persuading, to exhorting, and to influencing his people? I venture to advance a hypothesis: that this perplexing prophecy can be understood only if it be applied to the Northern Kingdom. Punishment described in the Bible is of two kinds: physical and spiritual. It is the second kind which Isaiah is told about. The people (of the Northern Kingdom?) are to be deprived of sensitivity to God and of the ability to repent.

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