

Heschel's *The Prophets*, "Jeremiah"

Utterances denoting the wrath of God, the intent and threat of destruction, are found more frequently and expressed more strongly in Jeremiah than in any other prophet. For this reason, Jeremiah has often been called a prophet of wrath. However, it would be more significant to say that Jeremiah lived in an age of wrath. His contemporaries had no understanding of the portent of their times, of the way in which God was present at the time. They did not care for time. But a prophet has a responsibility for the moment, an openness to what the moment reveals. He is a person who knows what time it is. To Jeremiah his time was an emergency, one instant away from a cataclysmic event. "Cut off your hair and cast it away; / Raise a lamentation on the bare heights, / For the Lord has rejected and forsaken / The generation of His wrath" (Jeremiah 7: 29).

Jeremiah hurled a dreadful word at his people, accusing them of provoking or exciting God's anger, an expression not used by earlier prophets... "The sons of Israel and the sons of Judah . . . have done nothing but provoke Me to anger by the work of their hands, says the Lord. This city has aroused My anger and wrath" (32: 30-32). The words he proclaimed are merciless: "Thus says the Lord God: Behold, My anger and My wrath will be poured out on this place, upon man and beast, upon the trees of the field and the fruit of the ground; it will burn and not be quenched" (7: 20).

God's love of Israel is one of Israel's sacred certainties which Jeremiah, like Hosea and Isaiah before him, tried to instill in the minds of the people. "Thus says the Lord; / The people who survived the sword / Found grace in the wilderness... / With everlasting love have I loved you, / Therefore I have continued My faithfulness to you" (Jeremiah 31: 2-3). It was in love that God and Israel met...

Jeremiah depicted the dramatic tension in the inner life of God. As in Abraham's debate with God over the threatened destruction of Sodom, there was an implied desire not to let the judgment fall upon Judah. "Go to and fro in the streets of Jerusalem, / See, I entreat you, and know! / And look in its broad open places / To see whether you can find one / Who does justly, / Who practices faithfulness, / Says the Lord" (Jeremiah 5: 1). On account of their sins, the land would be subjected to devastation. Yet the judgment seemed to be painful to the Supreme Judge, and Jeremiah tried to convey that God sought to justify His judgment. The words of God betray an inner oscillation:

How can I pardon you? / Your children have forsaken Me, / Have sworn by those who are no gods...

Shall I not punish them for these things? / Says the Lord.

Shall I not avenge Myself / On a nation such as this? . . .

They judge not with justice / The cause of the fatherless...

They do not defend the rights of the needy.

Shall I not punish them for these things? / Says the Lord.

Shall I not avenge Myself / On a nation such as this?...

Their tongue is a deadly arrow; / It speaks deceitfully. / With his mouth each speaks peaceably to his neighbor, / But in his heart he plans an ambush for him.

Shall I not punish them for these things? / Says the Lord.

Shall I not avenge Myself / On a nation such as this?

Jeremiah 5: 7-9, 28-29; 9: 8-9 [H. 9: 7-8]...

A great hope was Israel; "the first fruits" were a foretaste of a harvest of blessing. But as time passed, God's hope was dashed. The people deserted their Redeemer and worshiped instead "the works of their own hands" (1: 16). God's pain and disappointment ring throughout the book of Jeremiah. What a sublime paradox for the Creator of heaven and earth to implore the people so humbly: "Thus says the Lord: / What wrong did your fathers find in Me, / That they went far away from Me, / And pursued what is worthless, And became worthless?" (Jeremiah 2: 5).

The heart of melancholy beats in God's words: "My people have forgotten Me" (18: 15); "they have forsaken Me" (2: 13). How much quiet tenderness, how much unsaid devotion is contained in the way in which the Lord of heaven and earth spoke of Israel: "My people," "My dear people" (bat ami)...

There were moments of compassion and moments of anger. But God's attachment to Israel is eternal. It was "My people" when the blessing was proclaimed... it was "My people Israel" when their wickedness was condemned (7: 12) or punishment announced. In regard to the external enemies of Israel, God said: "They have despised My people" (33: 24). As great as God's wrath is His anguish. Together with proclaiming the forthcoming disaster – "The people... shall be cast out in the streets of Jerusalem, victims of famine and sword, with none to bury them" (14: 16) – the prophet was told by God: "You shall say to them this word: / Let my eyes run down with tears night and day, / And let them not cease, / For My dearly beloved people (bat ami) is smitten with a great wound, With a very grievous blow" (Jeremiah 14: 17).

Again and again the prophet brought God's word to His beloved people: mourn, grieve, sorrow, lament. A sense of delicacy prevented the prophet from spelling out the meaning of the word: Mourn My people for Me as well... "Thus says the Lord: ... / O My dear people (bat ami), gird on sackcloth, / And roll in ashes; / Make mourning as for an only son, / Most bitter lamentation, / For suddenly the destroyer will come upon us" (Jeremiah 6: 22, 26)

These words are aglow with a divine pathos that can be reflected, but not pronounced: God is mourning Himself. "Thus says the Lord: Behold, what I have built I am breaking down, and what I have planted I am plucking up..." (45: 4).