

Heschel's *The Prophets*, Jeremiah (2)

O Lord, Thou hast deceived me,	פָּתִיתַנִּי ה'
And I was deceived;	וְנִאֲפָת
Thou art stronger than I,	חֲזָקְתַנִּי
And Thou hast prevailed.	וַתּוֹכֵל

Jeremiah 20: 7

This standard rendition misses completely the meaning of the text and ascribes to Jeremiah a pitiful platitude ("Thou art stronger than I"). The proper rendition of Jeremiah's exclamation would be:

O Lord, Thou hast seduced me,
And I am seduced;
Thou hast raped me
And I am overcome.

The meaning of this extraordinary confession becomes clear when we consider what commentators have failed to notice, namely, the specific meaning of the individual words. The striking feature of the verse is the use of two verbs *patah* and *hazak*. The first term is used in the Bible and in the special sense of wrongfully inducing a woman to consent to prenuptial intercourse... The second term denotes the violent forcing of a woman to submit to extranuptial intercourse, which is thus performed against her will... The first denotes seduction or enticement; the second, rape... 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.

These terms used in immediate juxtaposition forcefully convey the complexity of the divine-human relationship: sweetness of enticement as well as violence of rape. Jeremiah, who like Hosea thought of the relationship between God and Israel in the image of love, interpreted his own involvement in the same image. This interpretation betrays an ambivalence in the prophet's understanding of his own experience.

The call to be a prophet is more than an invitation. It is first of all a feeling of being enticed, of acquiescence or willing 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. The prophet feels both the attraction and the coercion of God, the appeal and the pressure, the charm and the stress. He is conscious of both voluntary identification and forced capitulation.

This dialectic of what takes place in the prophetic consciousness points to the approach we have adopted in our analysis. Objectively considered, it is, on the one hand, the divine pathos which stirs and entices the prophet, and, on the other hand, unconditioned power which exercises sheer compulsion over the prophet. Subjectively, it is in

consequence the willing response of sympathy to persuasion and also the sense of being utterly delivered up to the overwhelming power of God. 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.

"I am full of the wrath (hemah) of God" (6: 11), exclaims Jeremiah. He was filled with a blazing passion, and it was this emotional intensity which drove him to discharge God's woeful errands. The ultimate purpose of a prophet is not to be inspired, but to inspire the people; not to be filled with a passion, but to impassion the people with understanding for God. Yet the ears of this people were closed: "The word of the Lord is to them an object of scorn" (6: 16). Jeremiah was filled to overflowing with the wrath of God, which he could neither suppress nor contain, and which poured itself out therefore upon innocent "children in the street and upon the gatherings of young men" (6: 11). The wrath of God was not the threat of judgment being poured forth, but the upsurge of wrath in Jeremiah himself. The compulsion to pour it forth must not be regarded as an ecstatic compulsion, for up to this point Jeremiah had been able to contain his anger.

From this confession on the part of the prophet, it is clear with what agitation and passionate concern he was accustomed to fulfill his vocation. Again and again Jeremiah proclaimed the pathos of wrath. His being filled with divine wrath was his sympathy with it. Jeremiah not only experienced such sympathy; he was fully conscious of his experience...

The question may be asked whether, to the mind of Jeremiah, his sympathy proceeded from an internal impulse or whether it was forced upon him from without. The phrase, "Thou hadst filled me with indignation," might justify the supposition that he experienced his agitation not as a personal response, but as an inoculated emotion, a state of being possessed. However, as we shall see, such a supposition is improbable. According to Jer. 25: 15-29, the prophet was told by the Lord: "Take from My hand this cup of wine of wrath (hemah), and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it... Then you shall say to them, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Drink, be drunk and vomit, fall and rise no more, because of the word I am sending among you." To drink of the divine wrath meant the same as to be doomed or to drink poison. It would, therefore, be absurd to assume that Jeremiah drank or was filled with divine anger. It was the pathos that evoked in him an anger of sympathy.

The modes of prophetic sympathy are determined by the modes of the divine pathos. The pathos of love and the pathos of anger awake corresponding tones in the heart of the prophet. In his confessions Jeremiah allows us to obtain a glimpse of the fervor of love as well as of the raging of anger against the people. Through insight into the nexus between prophetic emotion and divine pathos, it is possible to gain a clue to the meaning behind the conflicting and confusing emotions of Jeremiah's mind. His inconsolable grief over the

destiny of the people is an expression of fellowship and love; the people's anguish is his anguish. However, his emotions are not simply an expression of instinctive attachment to his people or a feeling of personal involvement in their fate. At times Jeremiah even wished to abandon his people... Ardent as was his love for the people, he was primarily driven by what God felt for Israel. Accord with divine pathos determined his attractions and aversions. Love involves an appreciation of what is precious in the beloved person. Israel was precious because it was the consort and the beloved of the Lord...

Deeply hurt by the accusations, Jeremiah protested before God his innocence and his love of his people. The word of doom was not born in his heart (17: 6). "Remember how I stood before Thee... / To turn away Thy wrath from them" (Jeremiah 18: 20). Indeed, this was a part of the complexity of the prophet's inner existence. He was a person overwhelmed by sympathy for God and sympathy for man. Standing before the people he pleaded for God; standing before God he pleaded for his people. The prediction of doom was contrary to his own feelings. When the false prophet Hananiah predicted that within two years' time the captives of Judah, together with the vessels of the Temple, which had been taken to Babylonia after the first Babylonian invasion, would be brought back to Jerusalem, Jeremiah exclaimed: "Amen! May the Lord do so; may the Lord make the words which you have prophesied come true" (28: 6)...

The role of the prophet was ambiguous in the eyes of some of his contemporaries. The indignation that flowed from him, the anger he displayed, even when extrinsic to his mind, became so intimate a part of his soul that those exposed to it could easily mistake it as his own antipathy rather than as sympathy with divine anger, and could assume that he had his own ax to grind, that he was giving vent to personal hostility. It seems that Jeremiah was accused of feeling delight in anticipating the disaster which he had announced in the name of the Lord. He who loved his people, whose life was dedicated to saving his people, was regarded as an enemy. Over and above the agony of sensing the imminent disaster, his soul was bruised by calumny. What protection was there against such backbiting? No one could look into his heart, but everybody was hurt by his words. Only the Lord knew the truth...

Aside from the moral problem involved in the harsh petitions, there is the personal problem. Do not such contrasts or opposing attitudes indicate a lack of integrity? Is not his pleading for the destruction of his opponents a collapse of his power of mercy? A way of comprehending these contradictions as being parts of a unified personality is to remember that the prophet's inner life was not wholly his own. His emotional situation reflected the divine relation to Israel: compassion as well as anger. What he felt was not always original with him. "Filled with the wrath of God," it was beyond his ability to weigh, measure, or control the outburst of anger. The actual occasion of such an outburst may at times have been a personal one; its possibility and intensity derived from sympathy. The tension of being caught, heart and soul, in two opposing currents of violent emotion, was more than a human being could bear. "Cursed be the day, on which I was born!... O that I had in the desert A wayfarers' lodging place, that I might leave my people / and go away from them!