

## **Heschel's *The Prophets*: Human Dignity as Divine Concern / Dror Bondi**

### **"The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement" (1973)**

For many years I lived by the conviction that my destiny is to serve in the realm of privacy, to be concerned with the ultimate issues and involved in attempting to clarify them in thought and in word... Three events changed my attitude. One was the countless onslaughts upon my inner life, depriving me of the ability to sustain inner stillness. The second event was the discovery that indifference to evil is worse than evil itself... The third event that changed my attitude was my study of the prophets of ancient Israel, a study on which I worked for several years until its publication in 1962. From them I learned the niggardliness of our moral comprehension, the incapacity to sense the depth of misery caused by our own failures... The more deeply immersed I became in the thinking of the prophets, the more powerfully it became clear to me what the lives of the prophets sought to convey: that morally speaking there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings.

In the academic environment in which I spent my student years philosophy had become an isolated, self-subsisting, self-indulgent entity, *a Ding an sich*, encouraging suspicion instead of love of wisdom. The answers offered were unrelated to the problems, indifferent to the travail of a person who became aware of man's suspended sensitivity in the face of stupendous challenge, indifferent to a situation in which good and evil became irrelevant, in which man became increasingly callous to catastrophe and ready to suspend the principle of truth. I was slowly led to the realization that some of the terms, motivations, and concerns which dominate our thinking may prove destructive of the roots of human responsibility and treasonable to the ultimate ground of human solidarity [...]

It was the realization that the right coins were not available in the common currency that drove me to study the thought of the prophets. Every mind operates with presuppositions or premises as well as within a particular way of thinking. In the face of the tragic failure of the modern mind, incapable of preventing its own destruction, it became clear to me that the most important philosophical problem of the twentieth century was to find a new set of presuppositions or premises, a different way of thinking [*The Prophets*, pp. xviii-xix].

The fundamental experience of the prophet is a fellowship with the feelings of God, **a sympathy with the divine pathos**, a communion with the divine consciousness [...] The typical prophetic state of mind is one of being taken up into the heart of the divine pathos. Sympathy is the prophet's answer to inspiration, the correlative to revelation... The emotional experience of the prophet becomes the focal point for the prophet's understanding of God. He lives not only his personal life, but also the life of God. The prophet hears God's voice and feels His heart. He tries to impart

the pathos of the message together with its logos. As an imparter his soul overflows, speaking as he does out of the fullness of his sympathy [p. 26].

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 [p. 32].

Why should religion, the essence of which is worship of God, put such stress on justice for man? Does not the preoccupation with morality tend to divest religion of immediate devotion to God? Why should a worldly virtue like justice be so important to the Holy One of Israel? Did not the prophets overrate the worth of justice? Perhaps the answer lies here: righteousness is not just a value; it is God's part of human life, *God's stake in human history*. Perhaps it is because the suffering of man is a blot upon God's conscience; because it is in relations between man and man that God is at stake. Or is it simply because the infamy of a wicked act is infinitely greater than we are able to imagine? People act as they please, doing what is vile, abusing the weak, not realizing that they are fighting God, affronting the divine, or that the oppression of man is a humiliation of God. "He who oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, He who is kind to the needy honors Him" (Proverbs 14:31).

Justice is not an ancient custom, a human convention, a value, but a transcendent demand, freighted with divine concern. It is not only a relationship between man and man, it is an *act* involving God, a divine need. Justice is His line, righteousness His plummet (Isa. 28:17). It is not one of His ways, but in all His ways. Its validity is not only universal, but also eternal, independent of will and experience... God's concern for justice grows out of His compassion for man. The prophets do not speak of a divine relationship to an absolute principle or idea, called justice. They are intoxicated with the awareness of God's relationship to His people and to all men. Justice is not important for its own sake; the validity of justice and the motivation for its exercise lie in the blessings it brings to man. For justice, as stated above, is not an abstraction, a value. Justice exists in relation to a person, and is something done by a person. An act of injustice is condemned, not because the law is broken, but because a person has been hurt. What is the image of a person? A person is a being whose anguish may reach the heart of God. "You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. If you do afflict them, and they cry out to Me, I will surely hear their cry... if he cries to Me, I will hear, for I am compassionate" (Exod. 22:22-23, 27). When Cain murdered his brother Abel, the words denouncing his crime did not proclaim: "You have broken the law." Instead we read: "And... the Lord said: What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to Me from the ground" (Gen. 4:10).