



Understanding the Prophets

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The Hebrew Prophets:

Selections Annotated & Explained.

Rami Shapiro, Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2004. \$16.99 167pp

Long relegated to the margins of Jewish thought, the biblical prophets made a comeback in the modern era as the early Reform Movement declared "prophetic Judaism" its hallmark, and Jewish civil rights activists found in the prophets a call to activism.

Now, Rami Shapiro has reclaimed the prophets yet again, this time as a component of the new breed of Jewish spirituality that emphasizes the exploration of the self as a means of encountering God.

The Hebrew Prophets: Selections Annotated & Explained serves as a "prophets-lite" book; Shapiro offers readers easily digestible snippets from the prophetic books along with his own self-help-style meditations on the text.

Explaining his focus on the development of a personal relationship with the prophets, Shapiro writes: "The prophets are speaking to you, though not to you alone. They need you to listen as only you can; to listen with ears attuned to your life and your situation so you might hear what you need to hear in this moment. . ." (xii)

Shapiro further instructs his readers, "At least once each day, pick [this book] up and read a section or two at random. . . [and ask] What is the prophet saying to you?" (ibid) as though to establish his text as a siddur and the words of the prophets as elements of a new liturgy.

This understanding of the prophetic message as intensely personal runs counter to Abraham Joshua Heschel's comment that: "Religious experience, in most cases, is a private affair. . . In contrast, prophetic inspiration is for the sake, for benefit, of a third party. . . Justice bespeaks a situation that transcends the individual, demanding from everyone a certain abnegation of self, defiance of self-interest, disregard of self-respect." (The Prophets [New York: Harper Perennial Classics, 2001] 258)

For Heschel, who found in the prophets inspiration for his civil rights work, the prophetic voice demands action; for Shapiro, in contrast, the prophets primarily call for self-actualization. Glossing the words of the prophet Jeremiah, "If you execute justice. . . then will I allow you to dwell in this place," Shapiro comments. "When you act unjustly, cruelly, selfishly, you do not dwell anywhere. . . But if you act justly, kindly, and selflessly, you . . . can dwell in the moment without fear." (108) Justice, in Shapiro's configuration, is not an end unto itself, but rather a means to dwelling with God.

Shapiro's declared pantheism almost forces him into defining self-reflection as the preferred response to the divine call. If, as Shapiro comments, "you cannot separate from God, because you cannot be other than God," (163) heeding the prophetic message requires an encounter with the self.

But the very power of the prophets lies in their ability to speak for a God who is exterior to -- and therefore able to be in relationship with -- the Jewish people. Collapsing the distance between God, the people, and the prophets such that the three become manifestations of the one, reduces the prophetic voice to just one more element of human consciousness.

Shapiro further dilutes the prophetic message by eliminating evidence that the biblical prophets speak within the context of a community. In personalizing the words of the prophets, Shapiro discharges us from any responsibility to transform our own communities into communities of justice; in his formulation, the transformation of the self suffices.

Shapiro is right to insist that each person hear the prophetic voice in a personal way. If the prophets demand a complete abnegation of the self, then we must respond by working altruistically for justice for others without ever acknowledging the extent to which our own redemption is ultimately bound up in the redemption of the world. Just as each prophet brings his own voice to the divine message, so too should each of us integrate our own voices, needs, and experiences into our pursuits of justice.

At the same time, Shapiro's emphasis on the self validates a self-indulgent religious mode that can be understood as permission to abdicate responsibility for the wellbeing of the greater world. In reading Shapiro, we would do well to remember Heschel's admonition that "Nothing is further from the prophetic mind than to inculcate or to live out a life of feeling, a religion of sentimentality. Not mere feeling but action will mitigate the world's misery, society's injustice, or the people's alienation from God." (Ibid, 396)

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