

I. Hosea

1. Things eternal

LONG BEFORE THE great quake, in the days of the second Jeroboam (when all shined bright in Israel except for its past and future), Hosea fell in love. As a very young man, well before God first spoke to him, Hosea saw Diblaim's daughter in a dream, standing alone and lovely upon the crest of a tranquil knoll—a confusing vision streaked with sunlight yet also shrouded in mists.

Hosea called out to her. She smiled then danced away.

Though she should have been a stranger, Hosea knew her name.

*

To describe Hosea's eventual marriage to Gomer as rocky would be like conceding that fire is warm. Theirs was a doomed and sordid match before it began. Yaron, as Hosea's longest, best and only friend, had begged Hosea not to do it.

"You cannot make that soiled woman your wife," he had insisted.

"It is God's will," Hosea answered and so, to him, there was nothing more to discuss.

To his credit, Hosea never failed in his duty. Full of faith, strong in his belief that a day would come when God's will would be explained, he carried on. But five years and three children after what seemed like an awful decision, Hosea and Gomer's ugly marriage had run its course.

In the shade of sycamores at the pagan sanctuary atop Beth-el, a place Hosea loathed, Yaron sat with the frowning couple as a kind of common agent, directing their final moments together after years of Gomer's betrayal and Hosea's pain. None of them spoke while the local priests lit bowls of incense and hundreds of Baal-worshiping Israelites flocked toward the base of a huge golden calf.

"I'm done with you," Hosea told Gomer afterward. "I will turn my face from you and, when you long for my comfort, when you cry out begging to return to me I will no longer hear your voice."

It was late in the day, darkening sky, full moon rising. Gomer arched a brow, ready to laugh, it seemed, or spit. (She remained handsome even then, if not as stunning as she once was, though she behaved as if she held the evening star in her right hand.) "Good," she said, tossing her head to cast her curls aside, "I do not need you now, sir. In fact, I never did."

"We shall see," Hosea said with a very odd smile.

Not inclined to promote a reconciliation, Yaron stood and said, "Then it's settled, is it not? A long journey after which we reach a short, neat understanding. Let's agree quickly upon terms and leave this place at once."

But some moments have wills of their own, it seems, unbent by men's desires; it was the sighing earth that ended their day at the moment of its choice, not Yaron's glib summary.

A roar came up from the valley as treetops along the ridge line, east, tossed in silhouette beneath the oddly throbbing moon. Adults screamed like children as a running furrow of earth raised and lowered them in place like tethered ships. Quickly up on all fours after the groundswell passed, Yaron watched the metal cow in the courtyard shake then collapse and break. The main building splintered open before his eyes and the High Priest, Amaziah, shot out a window then tumbled across the grass. When the would-be holy man finally stopped, he rushed to scoop the broken icon's head into his arms, moaning its loss as if the dark, cold thing had been his only child.

Posts and pillars shook like withered sticks. The sanctuary's stone outer wall split with a thunderous noise along its length, its base falling outward; the upper half, in. While they watched, the earth groaned open and swallowed the virgins' quarters whole (listing at an angle before easing out of sight, like a great, hulking ship foundering at sea).

Only after the wanton lodge disappeared completely did the earth's upheaval cease.

"We all could have been crushed," Gomer shrieked as dust sparks spun above their heads.

"Except for the actual crushing," Hosea said, "it is already so..."

Even as the anguished wailing of others continued to obscure their thoughts, Yaron and Gomer stopped to blink at their sullen prophet—for it was clear that he had been called of God by then—confused by his words.

"...for surely this great shaking marks the beginning of the end of Israel," Hosea finished.

Gomer stood and patted herself top to bottom, front to back, no modesty to her probing, as if to convince herself that all her parts had survived. "I should have never married you," she said. (Even as heaven and earth rocked with aftershocks, the moment remained about her.) "You are a cold, narrow, unforgiving man."

"How does one forgive the unrepentant?" Hosea asked, not bothering to find her eyes.

Too hardened by life to consider the question, Gomer cursed aloud, having discovered that her backside had been muddied. "With or without you, sir," she told Hosea, "as God lives, you know I shall survive," an odd oath to hear from the lips of a godless woman.

She began away then, stepping gingerly around debris, grunting like a plow-ox and with her skirts raised much too high. Yaron heard none of the last words Hosea spoke to her (for the earth had continued rumbling) but Gomer, having heard it all, stopped, faced him and said, "You cannot be serious."

"O, yes!" Hosea answered. "Every word of it shall be so."

Gomer laughed as she slipped outside through a cleft in the broken wall into deepening shadow, seemingly unaware that her life—like all of Israel—would never be the same.

*

On their way back to Samaria that evening, Yaron and Hosea observed collapsed homes by moonlight, canted wine presses, tumbled mills, ruptured bridges and diverted streams. In the pass near the road to Jeshanah they found a sudden, spectacular offset in the highway reaching half the height of a man. Though the devastation only increased as they continued north, Hosea passed it blandly, as if reality meant nothing to him.

They camped that evening near the base of Mount Gerizim. When, before bedding down, Yaron asked about the quake they had survived—seeking its meaning from his friend with respect to the days to come—Hosea chided him with the almost forgotten words of Amos...

“I saw the Lord standing upon the altar and he said, Smite the lintel of the door that the posts may shake and cut them in the head, all of them and I will slay the last of them with the sword. He that flees them shall not flee away and he that escapes them shall not be delivered.”

To his shame, Yaron had once mocked Amos. “Are you saying,” he asked, “that today’s calamity is the very shaking your friend, the prophet, Amos foretold?”

“You saw the bleeding brow of the so-called priest,” Hosea said.

Yaron pressed Hosea to tell him more, but remained unsatisfied.

“Tell me, Yaron,” Hosea answered instead, “why has it taken an earthquake for you to incline your ear toward our god, the God of Israel?”

“Isn’t that always the way with ordinary people?” Yaron countered in his defense. “Every man is not a prophet.”

A mild aftershock shook them. (They had jarred the earth all night.) Hosea lowered himself onto a bed of grass and closed his eyes to sleep, not bothering to respond.

Ordinary people had never interested him.

*

In the morning, Yaron and Hosea ate berries, drank fresh water from a nearby stream then hiked past the road leading to the ancient city of Shechem. There Joshua, at his end, assembled the tribes of Israel to warn them to serve the Lord in sincerity.

Shechem too had been devastated by the quake.

Later that day they found the foothills about Samaria in worse condition. The little home Hosea had shared with Gomer had been shattered roof and post. (Gomer had apparently arrived earlier, having charmed some horseman for a ride, Yaron suspected, and recovered those possessions she had failed to take with her when she first abandoned her husband.) In the city, they found Hosea’s parents and their modest home intact. Hosea’s children were relieved to see him though only Jezreel, the oldest, seemed to grasp what had occurred.

“Let’s go up the hill and inspect the palace,” Yaron said. “I’ll bet it too is wrecked.”

“It is,” Hosea said, “I’ve seen it.”

So it was with prophets, all difficult men to distract, entertain or surprise.

*

Nothing further to do, Yaron embraced Chana and Beer, Hosea's mom and dad, then kissed the cheeks of Jezreel, Lo-ruchama and Lo-ammi. "I'm off to Hazor to learn how my family has fared," he said while untethering his horse. "But I say to you again, friend," he told Hosea, "I am pleased beyond words that you are finally done with that woman. You have certainly, through all your efforts, fulfilled your commitment to your god."

"Even now," Hosea told his pagan friend, "our story is incomplete."

"But only yesterday I heard you promise Gomer you would forever turn your face."

A too familiar light shined in Hosea's pale blue eyes. "Not forever, Yaron," he said, "but only for a while."

Yaron's shoulders drooped. "After all she has done to offend you? After all her willfulness and faithlessness, you do not declare an end? I cannot begin to comprehend such unearned mercy."

"Such is always the case," Hosea answered, "when man confronts things eternal. How can I surrender Gomer and make her like earth? All my compassions remain kindled. Despite all that has happened I cannot fully execute my anger against her."

Yaron sighed, there being no benefit to contending with a man who hears the voice of God.

"Do not concern yourself," Hosea said, "with what you perceive to be my inconsistencies. They are but an illusion. Hasten north to join your family but be at ease, good friend. In my spirit I know that they are safe."

Yaron smiled. Sometimes it was extremely comforting to have a prophet for a friend...

"And mind my past cautions," Hosea added. "Flee Hazor. Abandon your pagan ways. For you and yours shall not always be safe in that city."

...and, sometimes, it was not.

*

The hike from Beth-el to Samaria had been thirty miles. The distance from Samaria to Hazor was easily twice that. Upon his horse, it would take Yaron two days to reach the city provided that the way, following the earth's upheaval, remained passable.

On his way, walking the newly furrowed earth and fording suddenly crooked streams, Yaron's thoughts turned back to his friend, Hosea. How simple his life had been before his god, the Lord of Hosts, had burdened him with a strange summons.

Gomer had not always been a harlot.

Hosea had not always seemed a fool.