Walking Humbly: A Brief Interpretive History of Micah 6:8

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In Gustav Dore's etching, "Micah Exhorting the Israelites," the prophet stands against a decaying wall with his arms raised and his eyes lowered. Few people targeted in Micah's immediate sightline look directly at the prophet. Bowed in shame, they turn away. Those who do look have either fear or skepticism in their eyes, just the sort of facial expressions one would expect from a group reminded of their wrongdoings and the attendant consequences. A cursory examination of the eight chapters of Micah help us understand the issues the prophet might be bringing to the attention of his flock that would have received this mixed response. Many of Micah's prophecies were standard tropes for Hebrew prophets waging a moral and theological battle with their constituents: idol worship, the destruction of Jerusalem, the ravaging of Samaria, the dishonesty of the privileged. Micah also predicted the eventual restoration of Judea with a salvific postscript that is also common to our darkest prophetic and apocalyptic narratives.

We know almost nothing about Micah as an individual.[1] His parables and chastisements offer little insight into his character. The book reads like a string of small exhortations and observations without a uniting theme. The Sages of the Talmud do little to fill in this picture; they merely identify the broad time period in which Micah lived and performed his holy work: "Rabbi Yo?anan said: He was the first of the four prophets who prophesied during that period, and these are they: Hosea, Isaiah, Amos, and Micah."[2]

What we do know about the book of Micah is the popularity and influence of, arguably, its most significant verse: "He (God) has told you, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: Only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your God" (Micah 6:8). We may have a tiny indication of the verse's importance in Dore's etching: a right foot sticks out from the fold of Micah's tunic, suggesting that he will soon leave the small platform, perhaps to walk modestly with his God.

Doing justice, loving goodness, and walking humbly with God are the desideratum of a strenuous religious life, and not nearly as easy to accomplish as the prophet's simply-phrased request. Perhaps because of this, the verse has garnered a lot of attention from the Talmud onward. In fact, focusing only on this verse from Micah results in a disconnection of the verse from its biblical context, sometimes producing interpretations that veer very far from its literal context. We will travel through

some well-known explanations of this expression, and then present a contextual understanding that emerges from a study of the entire book and its most prominent messages.
Our first stop is the Talmud. In BT *Sukkah*, R. Elazar takes apart each clause in Micah 6:8 in his search for the verses deeper meaning and legal implications.

And this is what Rabbi Elazar said: What is the meaning of that which is written: "It has been told you, O man, what is good, and what the Lord does require of you; only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8)? "To do justly"; this is justice. "To love mercy"; this is acts of kindness. "To walk humbly with your God"; this is referring to taking the indigent dead out for burial and accompanying a poor bride to her wedding canopy, both of which must be performed without fanfare. The Gemara summarizes: And are these matters not inferred *a fortiori*? If, with regard to matters that tend to be conducted in public, as the multitudes participate in funerals and weddings, the Torah says: Walk humbly, then in matters that tend to be conducted in private, e.g., giving charity and studying Torah, all the more so should they be conducted privately.[3]

R. Elazar moves from the generalized sense of justice and mercy to the very specific act of burying those who have no one else to do so, balancing public, communal activities with private acts of generosity. Modesty here is a reflection of commandment performance that is to be done privately lest it catalyze sanctimoniousness in the mind of the performer.
Another talmudic source references Micah 6:8 in the context of reducing 613 commandments to Jewish laws' most essential demands. One opinion suggests that the Torah can be captured in the three requirements derived from the prophet's wise advice.

Micah came and established the 613 mitzvoth upon three, as it is written: "It has been told to you, O man, what is good, and what the Lord does require of you; only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).[4]

It is no wonder this verse enjoyed such a long exegetical history. If 6:8 encapsulates all that the religious life is meant to be, it is easy to understand the verse's importance.
Other understandings of Micah 6:8 narrow its interpretive scope to a specific observation or requirement. Rashi, for example, uses the popular talmudic framework of comparing human limitation with God's expansiveness:

To walk modestly: The Holy One, blessed be He, is not like on of flesh and blood. A person who shames his friend and tries to pacify him. And he [the offended one] says, "I will not be pacified by you until so-and-so arrives since you embarrassed me before them but the Holy One, blessed be He, desires only that one returns to him privately.

Human beings need to make their repentance public after embarrassing or shaming someone in front of others. This is understandable and codified in Maimonides' "Laws of Repentance."[5] But God does not require such displays. Humility in this context is walking beside God in a simple, beautiful state of sinless friendship.
We now jump from the Talmud to a medieval biblical exegete to the library of Mussar literature. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto in his *Path of the Just*, first published in Amsterdam in 1738, presents Micah 6:8 as a prooftext that the pious must contract themselves in the presence of others:

There are some additional matters of piety, which if a person were to do before common people, they will laugh at him and ridicule him, thereby sinning and incurring punishment through him, and this is something he could have abstained from doing since these things are not complete obligations. Thus, for such things, it is certainly more proper for the Hassid to abstain from it than to do it. This is what

scripture says: "and walk discreetly with your God" (Micah 6:8). Many great Hassidim abstained from their pious practices when in the presence of the common masses because it appears like arrogance.[6]

In what seems like the very opposite of Rashi's reading, Luzzatto suggests that a person of particular piety withhold external expressions of religiosity when with others who will not only fail to understand them, but may regard them negatively. Modesty in this view is limiting spiritual gestures to communities of like-minded individuals. While we can appreciate the self-righteousness to which Luzzatto alerts us, he may have also inadvertently minimized the beneficiary aspect of role modeling such practices, thereby making religious observance unnecessarily binary.

We find an even further interpretive narrowing in a popular synopsis of Jewish law written more than a century later: the *Kitzur Shulhan Arukh*, written by R. Shlomo Gansfried in Hungary and published in 1864.

It is written: "You shall walk modestly with your God." It is therefore necessary to be modest in all your ways. Thus when putting on or removing your shirt or any other garment from your body, you should be very careful not to uncover your body. You should put on and remove the garment while lying in bed under a cover. You should not say: "I am in a private, and dark place." "Who will see me?" Because the Holy One, Blessed is He, Whose glory fills the entire world [sees] and to Him darkness is like light, Blessed be His Name. Modesty and shame bring a person to submissiveness before Him, Blessed be His name.[7]

Walking modestly is, in this interpretation, taken very literally as an expression of physical modesty in comportment when getting dressed. One is to limit the view of the body not only to others but even to oneself. Modesty demands submissiveness before God, encapsulated by not revealing one's skin when dressing, to the extent that this can be prevented.

R. Gansfried's more literal reading achieved a great deal of influence among those who reduced Micah's to a demand for modesty to clothing and appearance. Rashi and R. Luzzatto also discuss externalities in their respective readings, but R. Gansfried furthers this to suggest that when walking with God we do so with an intimacy informed by physical modesty.

In this brief exegetical summary that is in no way exhaustive, we've moved from a first-century understanding of Micah 6:8 as a summation of the entire Torah to a nineteenth-century recommendation to get dressed under one's covers. None of these understandings, however, deals with the verse in the context of its appearance in the Book of Micah. It is to this we now turn.

To understand 6:8 from the prophet's general worldview, we must examine a symbol from an earlier chapter. Chapter four opens with a picture of the "days to come" and provides psychic relief from the images of the book's grim introduction and Dore's portrait:

> The Mount of the Lord's House shall stand firm above the mountains; and it shall tower above the hills. The peoples shall gaze on it with joy, and the many nations shall go and shall say: "Come, let us go up to the Mount of the Lord, to the House of the God of Jacob; that He may instruct us in His ways, and that we may walk in His paths." For instruction shall come forth from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. Thus He will judge among the many peoples, and arbitrate for the multitude of nations, however distant; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not take up sword against nation; they shall never again know war. But every man shall sit under his grapevine or fig tree with no one to disturb him…. (Micah 4:1–4)

One day, all of Israel will see in the distance the Temple's radiance, and it will reflect their own. Not only will the Temple attract the Israelites, but it will also serve as a beacon for other nations who wish to seek its comforts and benefit from its powers of expiation.

This call to be physically present in Zion is matched, in the prophet's words, by the adjuration to have Zion's spiritual power move externally with the predictive image that has come true in our days: Torah leaving the environs of Jerusalem and touching the world. Micah echoes Isaiah 2:4 in wishing for a universe free of violence. In offering the inspiring picture of individual serenity of fig and vine immediately after his reassuring portrait of global security, Micah uses an expression found in two other places, I Kings 4:25 and Zechariah 3:10. Sitting without disturbance under one's own grapevine or fig tree was so potent an image of peace and freedom, it was cited by George Washington over 50 times, once significantly in his response to the Jews of Touro Synagogue in Rhode Island (August 18, 1790) as a guarantee of their political freedom.[8]
The fig image repeats itself later in Micah, but not in a particularly positive way:

> Woe is me! I am become like leavings of a fig harvest, like gleanings when the vintage is over, there is not a cluster to eat, not a ripe fig I could desire. The pious are vanished from the land. None upright are left among men; all lie in wait to commit crimes. One traps the other in his net. They are eager to do evil: The magistrate makes demands, and the judge [judges] for a fee. The rich man makes his crooked plea, and they grant it. The best of them is like a prickly shrub; the [most] upright, worse than a barrier of thorns. On the day you waited for, your doom has come—now their confusion shall come to pass. (Micah 7:1–4)

The warm and loving image of sitting beneath a vine or tree that produces shade and fruit is fast replaced by an image of hunger and want, of the withering of vegetation that takes place at harvest's end. This depletion, however, is not created by natural seasonal changes but by the wickedness of injustice. The pious are nowhere to be found. Rich men bend justice. Judges are influenced by bribes. All live in confusion. This must be the human landscape Dore saw fit to engrave from the book's seven chapters.
The book's last lines continue with a harsh judgment of a world punctured by unnatural suspicion.

> Trust no friend, rely on no intimate; be guarded in speech with her who lies in your bosom. For son spurns father, daughter rises up against mother, daughter-in-law against mother-in-law—a man's own household are his enemies. (7:5–6)

The family unit is not cohesive, loyal, or loving. The shade of Micah's fig tree has been replaced by a black cloud of misgiving and wariness. The prophet offers a bleak picture of daily life. From here, Micah quickly turns to God, in whom all trust must be placed: "Yet I will look to the Lord, I will wait for the God who saves me. My God will hear me" (7:7). In this moment, Micah prays that failure will build resilience, that darkness will give way to cracks of light:

> Do not rejoice over me, O my enemy! Though I have fallen, I rise again; though I sit in darkness, the Lord is my light. I must bear the anger of the Lord, since I have sinned against Him, until He champions my cause and upholds my claim. He will let me out into the light; I will enjoy vindication by Him. (7:8–9)

The prophet believes that there will be healing—"a day for mending your walls"—but sadly reckons that it "is a far-off day" (7:11). The chapter and book conclude with the wish that God will take the Israelites back in love, disregard their iniquity, and hurl their sins far away, keeping the oath and covenant made to the patriarchs long before.
Micah, like many other Hebrew prophets, was concerned with the cycle of goodness and evil that affects both nations and individuals. The fig tree that is the symbol of peace and prosperity can easily become shriveled without proper nourishment—when injustice becomes normative and arrogance demeans society's most vulnerable. It is in this context that 6:8 should be read, as a moral demand for a society built of individuals robed in charity and goodness, humbled by their God, walking beside the

divine to imitate sacred ways of being.
It is human nature to create social hierarchies that benefit the most powerful. By suggesting that humans walk with God, it is actually God who models modesty by deigning to walk beside us. If God can walk with us, then we can and must walk beside those less strong, those less competent, those less fortunate. In this spirit, R. A. J. Heschel's words about the prophetic impulse take on a deeper hue:

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, that indifference to evil is worse than evil itself, that in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible.[9]

Walking modestly for the prophet is walking with eyes wide open to the presence of anyone in need, waiting to perform acts of mercy, justice, and lovingkindness. Looking at a glimpse of the exegetical history of Micah 6:8 and its contextual meaning takes us straight back to the Talmud's expansive understanding. Religion stripped to its most essential elements asks both very little and a great deal of us: to return to a state of simplicity, broken and small in God's presence, able, in a state of vulnerability, to make those invisible visible, to create a society where we walk beside others because God is willing to walk beside us.

[1] For resources on the structure and meaning of the book, see Kenneth L. Barker, "A Literary Analysis of the Book of Micah," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 155 (October–December 1998): 437–448, Delbert R. Hillers, *Micah: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Micah*, ed. by Paul D. Hanson (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1984), Bruce K. Waltke, *A Commentary on Micah* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2008), Arvid S. Kapelrud, "Eschatology in the Book of Micah," *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. 11, Fasc. 4 (Oct., 1961): 392–405.
[2] BT *Pesakhim* 87a. Text translations from Sefaria.com.
[3] BT *Sukkah* 49b. For ease of reading, I have left in the explanations offered by the Koren Noe edition.
[4] BT *Makkot* 24a.
[5] Maimonides, "Laws of Repentance," *Mishneh Torah* 2:5.
[6] *Messilat Yesharim*, 20:19.
[7] *Kitzur Shulkhan Aruch* 3:1.
[8] See Michael and Jana Novak, *Washington's God: Religion, Liberty, and the Father of Our Country* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 239; Walter Brueggemann, "'Vine and Fig Tree': A Case Study in Imagination and Criticism," Catholic Biblical Quarterly 43, no. 2 (April 1981): 199, and Daniel L. Dreisbach, "'The 'Vine and Fig Tree' in George Washington's Letters: Reflections on a Biblical Motif in the Literature of the American Founding Era," Anglican and Episcopal History 76, no.3 (September 2007): 299–326, 301.
[9] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1996): 224.

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