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בס"ד

Reflections on the Book of Jonah

1. Backdrop

The Book of Jonah – a short and concise work of forty-eight verses – addresses a major theological issue and contains several sub-themes and messages of great import. As human personality is immensely complex and dynamic, particularly as regards an individual's relationship with G-d and His ways, interpreting it correctly is greatly dependent on life context. Accordingly, the Bible does not generally transmit its views on such matters through static, rigid assertions. It rather does so by way of narrative and conversation, leaving room for subtle distinctions and nuances. *Sefer Yonah* is unsurpassed in this respect.

Hashem instructs Yonah ben Amitai to go to Nineveh and call out regarding it [that it will soon be destroyed] “for their evil has risen before Me” (Jon. 1:2). Nineveh was one of the foremost cities of the ancient Near East, at one point the capital of Assyria, a nation that had been a major world power for centuries. G-d decided to punish this leading city for its extreme wrongdoing and Yonah was selected to inform its populace of the impending disaster, thus providing them an opportunity to repent from their evil ways and avert destruction.

Surely it is significant to our understanding of this work that Yonah is the prophet mentioned in the Book of Kings in conjunction with the extraordinary military successes of the expansionist king Yarob`am ben Yoash (ca. 785-745 BCE). Yarob`am was the king “who restored Israel's borders from Lebo-Hamat (about fifty miles north of Damascus) to the sea of the Arabah (the Dead Sea), in accordance with the words of Hashem, G-d of Israel, spoken through His servant Yonah ben Amitai the prophet” (II Kings 14:25).

Yarob`am was an evil-doer in Hashem's eyes, one who “did not depart from all the sins of Yarob`am ben Nabat, who had caused Israel to sin” (v. 24). The text explains that his tremendous success was because

“Hashem saw the affliction of Israel, that it was extremely bitter, without a supporter or sustainer (וְאֵין עֲזָרָה וְאֵין מְסַמְכֵה), and there were none to help Israel; And Hashem had not declared to blot out Israel's name from under the heavens, so He saved them through Yarob`am ben Yoash” (vv. 26-27). This statement of undeserved Divine compassion, when the alternative might have been total destruction of the nation, reminds the reader of the prediction in *Parashat Ha'azinu* which describes Hashem manifesting His merciful nature toward Israel when it actually deserved the worst [Deut. 32:27 ff.]. Some key similar terminology is employed in both passages.

Yonah's contemporaries Amos and Hoshea describe the perversion of justice and the oppression of the poor that were commonplace during the reign of Yarob`am ben Yoash as well as the debauchery that then prevailed among the wealthy classes and the priests. We will cite a number of excerpts from Amos that illustrate the point:

For three transgressions of Israel, for four, I will not reverse it, because they sell out the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of shoes...the way of the humble they pervert, a man and his father go to the same maiden...you ordered the prophets ‘Do not prophesy’ (Amos 2:6-12)... They know not how to do right, declares Hashem, they store corruption and plunder in their palaces (3:10)...[they] defraud the poor, crush the needy (4:1)...who turn justice to wormwood (5:7)... They hate him who rebukes at the gate, and abhor him who speaks with integrity...you impose a tax burden upon the poor and take a [hefty] portion of grain from him...enemies of the righteous, takers of bribes that turn aside the needy in the gate (5:10-12)...Who lie on ivory beds, stretched on their couches, eating the choicest of the flock...they sing along with the harp, like David they consider their musical instruments; who drink from wine bowls...but they are not grieved for the

destruction of Joseph...(6:4-6) ...[the priest told him] “at Bethel do not prophesy again” (7:13)...to make the ephah small (while selling) and the sheqel large (in receiving payment), perverting scales of deceit (8:5).

Utterly detesting such practices, G-d issued many warnings of coming doom if the nation did not repent. He declared, “I will destroy it from upon the face of the earth, but I will not totally wipe out the House of Jacob” (Amos 9:8), depicting restoration and rebuilding of the nation for the remnant that will be saved.

G-d’s positive intervention on behalf of a sinful Israel provided Yonah a first-hand experience of Divine compassion on a totally unrepentant nation. Yonah undoubtedly had tried to reform the king and the nation from their evil ways in the manner of other prophets, with frustrating results, his rebukes rejected and his warnings scoffed at.

One can imagine how difficult it must have been for Yonah, Hashem’s servant, to receive prophecies from Him and transmit them to the thoroughly sinful king, informing him that if he proceeded on one or another campaign he would be victorious. And yet, the prophet had to witness the enormous prosperity and consequent pride engendered by Yarob’am’s many conquests. One wonders: as the prophet who conveyed the optimistic messages, was Yonah required to participate in victory celebrations? These celebrations, after all, were of the fulfillment of Hashem’s prophecy and favorable intervention. Did Yonah have to extend blessings for the king, the royal family and the court, despite the fact that he cannot have had anything but utter contempt for their behavior? Did they maintain a facade of appropriate commitment, superficially accommodating their heritage as well as Yonah? And Yarob’am ben Yoash reigned for forty-one years!

Yonah may very well have been extremely troubled in observing the remarkable degree of mercy G-d extended to the wicked, affording a sinful kingdom an undeserved yet prosperous reprieve from its destruction.

2. Chapter 1 - Independence of the Prophet

This background furnishes us insight into why Yonah was totally unreceptive to Hashem’s charge to go to Nineveh and attempted to evade it. (*Sefer Yonah* does not provide any explanation as to his reason for his position until he opens a window onto his thinking in the early part of Chapter 4. We will discuss that passage in due course.) But it is clear that Yonah is a man of integrity, deeply committed to his principles, and he does not believe in the appropriateness of the assignment G-d is asking of him. He decides to flee from remaining in the Divine presence rather than be forced to comply with an order he does not believe in. He goes to Jaffa, a city that possibly was not then under Israel’s hegemony, perhaps intending to escape Hashem’s more pronounced sphere of attention, based on His Covenant with Israel. He boards a ship to Tarshish, a destination in the opposite direction of Assyria.

The fact that Yonah struggled mightily against accepting a mission Hashem chose to send him on did not affect his concurrent recognition of Hashem’s sovereignty and omnipotence. He remained steadily committed to Him in all spheres other than the specific area connected to the assignment he was resisting.

G-d subjected the ship to a prodigious, life-threatening storm from which the sailors, hard as they tried, could not extricate themselves. When all aboard were praying, Yonah descended to the hull and fell into a deep sleep, for he had no doubt as to what was happening. He was determined not to yield to the pressure. Somehow, irrationally, he was hoping to escape his predicament, taking refuge in “hibernation.”

After praying to their gods and discarding cargo to no avail, the sailors cast lots hoping to discover who might be the cause of the crisis. Sure enough, the lot fell on Yonah. Upon being questioned by the fearful sailors he told them his story. He relished the opportunity to inspire these polytheistic believers with his declaration of commitment to Hashem, G-d of the heavens, creator of the sea and dry land, who brought about the storm because of him. He told them they should cast him overboard and the sea would calm down. His explanation and the extraordinary events they witnessed resulted in their conversion to the service of Hashem.

Despite Yonah's refusal to accept His command on this issue, G-d recognized the qualities of His conflicted servant and had a deep, abiding interest in educating him to more fully appreciate His ways of governance. The storm represents an aspect of His nurturing in Yonah a deeper apprehension of His sovereignty; the wind and sea proclaim that there is no escape from He who is master of all the forces of nature. The giant fish that swallowed Yonah, saving his life, continued the process; it compelled him to confront and contend with the logic of his philosophy as well as with his situation.

How are we to understand that a prophet, a man who has risen to great spiritual heights and received G-d's communication, would resist His command? The answer appears to include the consideration that a prophet must personally, and genuinely, relate to his task. We learn from other instances in Tanakh that true prophecy is not an ecstasy that overwhelms an individual, stifling his free will and imposing upon him goals that were not his own. Rather, while the prophetic experience inspires a prophet and deepens his insight, he retains his personal independence and his need to comprehend his mission in the context of his other insights and values. Within the realm of the prophet's belief in G-d and dedication to Him, there is the possibility for the presentation of a human perspective.

Moshe, at the burning bush, expressed his reservations about his capabilities and the mission he was being asked to undertake, and he did so at great length (Ex. 3-4). As G-d carries on a dialogue with him, it becomes clear that He acknowledges the legitimacy of Moshe's questions and concerns; He obviously supports the principle that a prophet is only expected to accept a mission that he can comprehend and relate to. Of course, when the questions are adequately answered the human being is expected to acquiesce to G-d's will. In the series of back-and-forth arguments with Moshe, Hashem endeavored to educate and persuade him. When all questions were answered, however, and Moshe continued his resistance, Hashem became angry with him and insisted that he accept the mission.

At a later point in his career, Moshe complained that he could not proceed according to the Divine guidelines for leadership that were then in place; he

requested death if an expansion of the leadership corps was not made, as he deemed it impossible for him to succeed. G-d acceded to his request (Num. 11).

At a certain crisis point, Jeremiah expressed his previous acquiescence to accept G-d's mission as, "You enticed me, Hashem, and I was enticed, You overpowered me and You prevailed" (פְּתִיתַנִּי ה' וְאַפְּתָהּ, Jer. 20:7). That appears to have been a case of overpowering with persuasion. The prophet admitted to having considered abandoning his mission (a state which does not seem to have persisted for merely a fleeting instant) apparently because the unmitigated suffering he was enduring did not make sense to him (v. 9). In a related vein, in Psalm 73 the author speaks about a wrenching inner conflict regarding his commitment to certain critical details of his service of G-d, essentially because of his suffering and the theodicy question. Job also articulated such thoughts. A somewhat similar situation obtains in the case of Yonah.

3. Chapters 2-3

After three days in the fish's belly, having had time to reflect upon his situation and while still in the fish, Yonah prays to Hashem. He recites a hymn in which he acknowledges Hashem's miraculous intervention in saving his life, declares his thanksgiving to Him and expresses hope for the future (Jon. 2:2-10)*. (It is noteworthy that virtually all the imagery and phraseology of his hymn have counterparts in the Psalms, sometimes being nearly identical**.) Significantly, Yonah did not directly touch on the pressing issue of his mission. However, he surely must have learned something regarding Divine compassion from his harrowing experience.

Hashem has the fish spew Yonah onto dry land and the prophet has a second chance. Sure enough, we see a partially reformed prophet. He accepts the renewed call to go to Nineveh and does fulfill his mission. However, as we are subsequently informed, he did so without agreeing with its purpose. He resolutely maintains his argument with G-d.

Yonah's warning quickly succeeds in prompting the people of Nineveh to repent from their evil ways. An amazing scene is described. After he walks one day into the city declaring his message – a city that

requires three days to traverse – a public fast is proclaimed. The fast is accompanied by the donning of sackcloth by king, nobility, common people and animals. The king removes his robe, sits in ashes and decrees fasting and sackcloth rituals upon man and animal. He calls for fervent prayers and repentance and everyone complies. With the use of humor and caricature, the point is made; perhaps they are not religiously sophisticated, but they respond to the prophet's call. Surely there is irony here in that an unspoken comparison is made with Israel, the nation covenanted with G-d, which does not respond so readily and sometimes hardly at all to the calls of the prophets.

4. Chapter 4 – Denouement

Yonah is greatly distressed by what transpired. He also is angry. He again prays to Hashem, this time referring to what he terms was his original argument, which had not previously been mentioned in the text. “Is this not my point while I was still on my own land, because of which I fled beforehand to Tarshish? For I know that You are a compassionate and merciful G-d, patient, abounding in kindness and who renounces punishment” (Jon. 4:2). In light of Nineveh's repentance, which will now spare it from destruction, he requests (v. 3): “please take my life from me, for my death is preferable than my life (טוב מוֹתִי מֵחַיִּי).” He still believes he is right and is upset for having played a role in averting the retribution. He feels strongly about his position: he does not want to live under the existing conditions in which his deeply held view is not part of the Divine design of earthly governance.

Hashem replies with a question: הֲהִיטֵב חָרָה לְךָ, often translated, as by the NJPS, “Are you that deeply grieved?” However, חָרָה appears to refer to “anger” (as rendered by the Old JPS) more than to “grief.” And הֲהִיטֵב, which immediately follows Yonah's statement that included that root (טוב מוֹתִי מֵחַיִּי), probably should be understood as meaning, “do you have good reason,” that is, “are you justifiably angry?” Hashem demands introspection. Yonah has committed himself to a principle, but he has not thoroughly thought it through. He does not respond. Obviously, these statements are critical to understanding Yonah's reason for choosing to evade his mission.

Yonah leaves the city, fashions a booth to sit in and waits to see what will happen. Although the repentance was widespread and Hashem surely accepted it, Yonah apparently still harbors a doubt, perhaps wondering if the people will maintain their newfound uprightness. He apparently retains the hope that after the forty days the retribution will materialize. Meanwhile, Hashem has a gourd plant grow over Yonah's head to provide him shade and “save him from his suffering.” Receiving this benefit, he is extremely happy about the gourd. At dawn, Hashem has a worm attack the gourd, causing it to wither. When the sun rose, He appoints an oppressively hot east wind so that when the sun beat down on Yonah's unprotected head he became faint. Without the gourd, he once again asks for death, repeating טוב מוֹתִי מֵחַיִּי.

This time Hashem asks him, “are you justified to be angry over the gourd?” (הֲהִיטֵב חָרָה לְךָ עַל הַקִּיקְיוֹן), to which Yonah responds, “I am justifiably angry, unto death.” He had become deeply attached to a simple plant that provided him some benefit. Hashem draws the lesson for him: “You pitied the gourd for which you did not work and which you did not cause to grow, which existed for one night and perished after one night. Shall I not have pity on Nineveh, the great city, that contains more than twelve myriad people who do not know between right and left, and many animals?” (4:10-11).

5. Concerning the Theme

How does the knowledge that Hashem is quick to accept repentance even from the very wicked and cancel the scheduled destruction relate to Yonah's principled resistance to his mission?

Saadia, Rashi and Radaq have understood or cited the view that Yonah feared that he would be ridiculed as a false prophet when and if the destruction did not come about, which he of course realized was possible. Of course – as Ibn Ezra objected – the Nineveh inhabitants (and all observers) also realized that if the sinners changed their ways the prophet's prediction would be canceled, having fulfilled its purpose. But Yonah might have thought that they would not make a full repentance, continuing many of their evil ways, while G-d would accept whatever little improvement they made, as He is merciful. Thus, the absence of

destruction might not be explained as due to repentance and the final result might be that Yonah would be viewed as a false prophet.

But another of Ibn Ezra's objections appears compelling. It is inconceivable that a true prophet, a servant of G-d, would be so concerned with a relatively trivial matter such as his reputation. A high caliber individual, especially a prophet and a servant of G-d, is surely above that. Some add that Yonah's concern was for the integrity of legitimate prophecy (see *Olam Hatanakh*), but that does not seem to be a strong enough motivation to explain his willingness to die for his cause.

Some Sages – followed by Ibn Ezra, Rashi and Radaq – understood Yonah's motivation to be to protect Israel (*Mekhilta Parashat Bo* 1:4). He feared that if Nineveh would repent it would shed unfavorable light on Israel, who had prophets that warned them regularly and still continued in their stubborn ways. G-d would then have no choice but to severely punish Israel. Such love of Israel to the point of self-sacrifice in rejecting G-d's will is somewhat reminiscent of Moshe's plea in his striving to have Hashem forgive Israel for the golden calf sin: "and if not, please erase me from Your book that You have written" (וְאִם אֶעֱזָב, מִסְפָּרְךָ אֲשֶׁר כָּתַבְתָּ, Ex. 32:32). However, with Moshe, it was merely a request, and a request that was not at the expense of anyone else, whereas in Yonah's case, such a ploy would have been seeking benefit for Israel at the expense of another nation's welfare. Such a course of action must also be considered unbecoming a true prophet.

Abarbanel was of the opinion that Yonah had a nationalistic motive of a different nature. He knew Assyria would be a major enemy of Israel – our story is deemed to have taken place not long before 722 BCE, when Assyria conquered and exiled the Northern Kingdom – and he hoped that by refusing his mission he could precipitate its destruction, saving Israel.

But is it acceptable to assume that a prophet could think that the Deity could be manipulated as the pagans did their gods? And would a prophet not realize that if he refused to fulfill the mission requested of him the Deity has other messengers?

Some have maintained that the story is a parable, which may include impossible and improbable happenings and motivations designed to more fully focus attention on its main points. Just as a man remaining conscious inside a big fish for three days is improbable or impossible, as is the repentance scene, having animals dressed in sackcloth, fasting and praying, a story may contain truly inexplicable details. Consider the cases of Eve conversing with the serpent and Balaam with his ass. However, acceptable as it may be from a literary point of view to have allegory within a narrative it undoubtedly is not in the spirit of Biblical writing to impute to a servant of G-d superficial and even frivolous beliefs.

Sefer Yonah does bring out monumental principles – the impossibility of escaping from G-d, His readiness to accept repentance from even the most wicked of people and renounce His right of retribution, His desire for a universalistic interpretation of religion, manifest through his concern for a heathen city, the recognition of fallibility even on the part of a true prophet and G-d's patient educative process. But as the focus is constantly and singularly on Yonah's tenacious insistence on his personal desire not to provide Nineveh opportunity to repent, it appears that the primary theme lies with an aspect of that particular feature.

Accordingly, others posit that Yonah did not want the city that was the cultural center of the wicked Assyrian empire rescued from destruction for the theological reason of realizing true justice. He believed that at a certain point, when so much evil-doing has been perpetrated, it should necessarily be punished and repentance should not be acceptable to reverse the retribution. On principle, he did not want to participate in an enterprise that he considered inherently inappropriate and wrong.

Assyria was well known as brutally cruel and wicked. Nineveh was the paradigm of evil, described in Sefer Nahum as follows: "Ah, city of crime, utterly treacherous, full of violence, where killing never stops" (Nah. 3:1, NJPS). A modern historian described Assyria's behavior upon capturing a city as follows:

The king's throne would be set up before the gates of the city and the prisoners would be paraded before him, led by the monarch of the

captured town who would undergo the most agonizing torture, such as having his eyes put out or confinement in a cage... Sargon had the defeated king of Damascus burned alive before his eyes...Meanwhile the soldiery had been massacring the population, and brought the heads of their victims into the king's presence, where they were counted up by the scribes...

(G. Contenau, *Everyday Life In Babylon and Assyria*, quoted by Heschel, *The Prophets*, v. 1 p.163)

Such long-time centers of evil, the cause of so much suffering, as was the case with Sodom and `Amora, should be eliminated from the face of the earth. If evildoers could repent for years of iniquity in a moment and be spared from punishment, are not the great principles of truth and justice violated? Where is the equity toward the innocent victims who are dead or maimed, and toward their families, suffering their privations and painful fates? Where is fairness to those who struggled and sacrificed dearly to live their lives in accordance with rightful standards?

We may also assume that Yonah considered punishment for the truly wicked to be a practical necessity for a better world. Compassion on sinners, providing them the opportunity to repent in a moment and avoid retribution, would diminish people's motivation to comport properly in the face of great temptation with the result that evil will abound. As Uriel Simon put it: "Divine compassion is perceived [by Yonah] not only as unnecessary but as actually harmful, because mercy undermines the force of justice by detracting from the certainty of punishment and obscures the clarity of judgment by adding a factor that cannot be calculated in advance" (JPS Commentary on Jonah, p. 35).

Yonah's full name – יוֹנָה בֶן דֹּוֹלָאֵם, "the dove, son of truth" – seems to indicate that he represents and champions the category of אֱמֶת (truth, a word that includes faithfulness and justice), particularly when that quality has arisen in a setting of dove-like gentle obedience. In his lament to G-d after the people of Nineveh repented, in essence citing the Divine attributes in accordance with their classical expression in Exodus 34:6-7, he virtually, but not fully, quoted from that verse. He said, "A gracious and compassionate G-d, slow to anger and abounding in

kindness" (קָל חַנוּן וְרַחוּם אֶרְךָ אַפַּיִם וְרַב חֶסֶד, Jon. 4:2). Significantly, he ceased invoking further particulars of that Exodus formulation, avoiding the next word, which would have extended the "abounding in kindness" to "truth" (וְאֱמֶת). He added, instead, "who repents from the punishment [that He was planning to mete out])," (וַיִּנְהָם עַל הַרְעָה) paraphrasing the narrative description of Hashem's changing His mind from the punishment He had in mind for Israel, "And Hashem relented from the evil" (וַיִּנְהָם ה' עַל הַרְעָה, Ex. 32:14). This was virtually identical to the verse that the Yonah narrative had just previously employed in a very precise application (Jon. 3:10). Yonah did not fully relate to G-d's characteristic of truth, considering it unduly eclipsed by His mercy, patience and kindness.

But G-d's way of thinking is different from Yonah's and He worked toward educating His prophet toward it. Compassion for all His creatures is a higher value than punishment of sinners and considerations related to it and is still consistent with truth.

It is thus eminently understandable why the Sages selected *Sefer Yonah* for the *haftarah* reading of *mincha* on Yom Kippur (BT Meg. 31a).

Endnotes

* After an introduction (v. 2), he cites the fact of his prayer and Hashem's response (v. 3). He defines his having been cast into the heart of the sea as Hashem's doing (v. 4) – ignoring the blameless sailors' act that was merely His vehicle – and declares that at first he had thought he was driven from His sight (v. 5a), an apt description of his imminent death, considering he had tried to escape Hashem's presence. However, he is now hopeful (v. 5b). He had almost drowned, but Hashem raised him from the pit (vv. 6-7). On the verge of fainting (and expiring) he prayed for salvation and was answered (v. 8). Those who rely on vanities (false gods) will abandon hope of being recipients of *hesed* (v. 9). He is confident that with proclamations of thanksgiving he will sacrifice to Hashem that which he vowed, acknowledging "salvation is to Hashem" (v. 10). It appears noteworthy that his prayer is comprised of eighty-one words. Although sublime, it specifically is not eighty words, as at that point he was not fully committed to all the details of the Covenant with G-d.

** Some of the prominent correspondences between Yonah's prayer and the Psalms:

ויאמר קראתי מצרה לי אל ה' ונענני ... שועתי שמעתה קולי: יונה 2:3
 מן המצר קראתי י-ה ענני במרחב י-ה: תהלים 118:5
 בצר לי אקרא ה' ואל אלקי אשוע ישמע מהיכלו קולי ושועתי.... תהלים 18:7
 ותשליכני מצולה בלבב ימים ונהר וסבבני כל משברייך וגלייך עלי עברו: יונה 2:4
 כל משברייך וגלייך עלי עברו: תהלים 42:8
 שתני בבור תחיתות במחשפים במצלות: תהלים 88:7
 סבובי כמים כל היום הקיפו עלי יחד: תהלים 88:18
 ואני אמרתי נגרשתי מנגד עיניך אך אוסרף להביט אל היכל קדשך: יונה 2:5
 ואני אמרתי בחפזי נגרזתי מנגד עיניך אכן שמעתה קול תחנוני בשועי אלייך: תהלים 31:23
 אשתחנה אל היכל קדשך ביראתך: תהלים 5:8
 אפפוני מים עד נפש תהום וסבבני סוף חבוש לראשי: יונה 2:6

אפפוני חבלי מות ונחלי בליעל יבעתוני: Also 5 18:5
 2Sam. 22:
 אפפוני חבלי מות ומצרי שאול מצאוני: תהלים 116:3
 כי באו מים עד נפש: תהלים 69:2
 ותעל משחת חיי ה' אלקי הגואל משחת חייכי יונה 2:7
 תהלים 103:4
 בהתעטף עלי נפשי את ה' וזכרתי ותבוא אלייך יונה 2:8
 תפלתי אל היכל קדשך
 בהתעטף עלי רוחי תהלים 142:4
 תבוא לפניך תפלתי תהלים 88:3
 משמרים הבלי שוא חסדם יעזבו יונה 2:9
 תהלים 31:7
 שגאתי השמרים הבלי שוא: תהלים 31:7

ואני בקול תודה אזבחה לך אשר נדרתי אשלמה יונה 2:10
 ושועתה לה'
 עלי אלקים נדריך אשלם תודת לך תהלים 56:13

A number of usages are unique to *Sefer Yonah* and the Psalms.

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