

# YOM KIPPUR: YONAH, GETTING THE MESSAGE

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## YONAH – GETTING THE MESSAGE

### Yom Kippur

*"HASHEM occasioned a large male fish to swallow Yonah, and Yonah was in the fish for three days and three nights. And he prayed to HASHEM, from the innards of the female fish."* Yonah 2:1-2

According to the simplistic reading of the Meggilah, HASHEM instructs Yonah to go to Ninveh, and tell the people there to do Teshuvah. Yonah, for some unknown reason, refuses to go, and instead boards a ship setting out to sea, seemingly, trying to run away from HASHEM.

The Mefarshim explain that nothing could be further from the truth. Yonah was a Navi HASHEM (a prophet of G-d). A Navi is a man of astonishing piety and greatness, who spends decades perfecting his Avodas HASHEM. While it is true that Yonah was running to sea, it wasn't because he was hiding from HASHEM, rather something much more complex was going on.

### Yonah's mission

In this time period, The Jewish nation had veered far off course. HASHEM planned to exile them from the land of Israel, and He intended to use the Assyrians to do the "dirty work". The problem was that Assyrians, themselves were, now so wicked, that they deserved destruction. HASHEM called on Yonah to go to the Ninveh, the capital, to bring the people to repent, so that they could remain in existence, and be the tool that HASHEM would use to expel the Jews.

Yonah's reaction was: HASHEM if you wish to punish your people, you are the Master of the Universe, you know best, but count me out. I want no part of this. And so Yonah's plan was simple. Direct prophecy was no longer given outside of the land of Israel. HASHEM hadn't yet given him the formal nevuah. So as long as he escaped the land of Israel before HASHEM appeared to him to assign him the mission, he wouldn't have to deliver it. And so he ran.

Nevertheless, Yonah understood that his running away would cost him his life. (*Mechilta*). But he was so dedicated to his people that nothing mattered, not even his life. He was willing to die, rather than be a part of hurting his nation. And so, he boarded a boat headed anywhere.

When the boat set out to sea and an enormous storm raged, threatening to destroy the boat. Seeing no other choice, the captain and crew threw Yonah overboard, and instantly the sea was calm. Along came an enormous fish that swallowed Yonah. Inside that fish Yonah did Teshuvah. The fish spit him out. HASHEM gave him the formal nevuah, and he went on to Ninveh.

## The Female Fish

Rashi makes a critical observation: When Yonah was thrown over board the posuk says he was swallowed by a *male* fish. Yet, when he davened to HASHEM, the posuk says that a *female* fish spit him out.

Rashi explains that both are correct. When Yonah was first thrown into the ocean he was swallowed by a male fish. He remained inside that fish for three days, and didn't repent. So HASHEM had that fish spit him out and he was then swallowed by a female fish. This fish was pregnant, and Yonah was squashed inside and uncomfortable. The discomfort caused him to do Teshuvah. Then the female fish spit him out.

This Rashi is very difficult to understand. We are dealing with an extremely idealistic man who is ready to give up everything because of his principles. He will run from his home, sacrifice his life, stand up to HASHEM Himself, all because he deeply believes in the justice of his cause. How would a little discomfort change his mind?

The answer to this is based on understanding of man.

## The Compound called Man

We humans are a complex breed. One minute we can be tolerant, understanding and accepting, and the next minute we can be hard-nosed, obstinate and rigid. In one situation we can be generous, magnanimous and kind, and in the next

situation we can be selfish, self centered and bratty. But it's the same person. And making sense of our actions requires a fundamental understanding of Creation.

To fashion man, HASHEM took two opposing elements, and synthesized them. He took a brilliant, untarnished neshama and put into a body. The neshama only wants to do that which is noble, correct and proper. Instinctively it knows exactly what is right and wrong, and it only wants to do exactly that. The body, on the other hand is very different. It is imprinted with appetites and cravings, needs and desires. It was formed with all of the instincts needed for its preservation. It only knows these passions, and is solely focused on one agenda—staying alive.

The conscious I, that thinks and feels, is made up of both of these parts. Deep within me is desire to accomplish great things, to help others; to serve HASHEM exactly as He wishes I should. And there

is another part of me that just couldn't care less. There is a full half of me that only knows and experiences physical desires. I am in caught right in the middle of these competing voices, and I have the free will to choose which side I will listen to.

## Understanding Yonah

This seems to be the answer to the question on Rashi. As great as Yonah was, he erred. While his motivation was pure, he took a stand against HASHEM. And, as righteous, and virtuous as his motivations were, he was wrong and on some level he knew it. Deep within him, he knew the right thing to. But that was the problem. Because of his devotion he was willing to pay any price, endure any hardship to keep his commitment. He had made his decision and was willing to sacrifice all for it—but it was wrong. How do you get him to reconsider? How do you get him to contemplate that he has embarked on a wrong course.

What Yonah needed was suffering. Pain is powerful tool. It can causes a person to introspect, to reconsider, to think things through and view them in a different light. And it caused him to reweigh the issue and recognize his mistake. HASHEM put Yonah into the female fish, so that the distress would allow him to rethink things and recognize his mistake. He knew it all along, but had pushed it down. The discomfort caused him to revisit the issue and confront the truth.

This concept is very applicable to our lives.

HASHEM is more kindly, giving, generous than any human we could ever imagine. And everything that HASHEM does is for the best. Yet, there are times when HASHEM will put us into circumstances that are "not comfortable", situations of pain and distress, and it was all orchestrated for one reason: so that we rethink things, that we look deep within ourselves, and we do that which deep down we know is the right thing.

When a human being experiences pain the first question he should ask himself is why? Why am I suffering? Why is life hard? There may be times when we don't know the answer. And there also may be times when the answer is right there within us, but we aren't listening. Sometimes the pain of the situation itself is just what we need to tap into that inner truth, and accept that which is ultimately best for us.

**For more on this topic please listen to Shmuz #81 - All for My People – Ahavas Yisrael**

Rabbi Shafier is the founder of the Shmuz.com – The Shmuz is an engaging, motivating shiur that deals with real life issues.

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