

# YONAH: INTRODUCTION AND METHOD

*by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin*

Most of us have a definite impression about Sefer Yonah. If, like most people, you know it from leafing through the Yom Kippur prayer-book, your recollection may be that of a whale that swallowed the prophet who refused to do his job. You might remember Yonah's flight to Tarshish "from before the Lord", perhaps the storm at sea, the jaws of the awaiting whale and his reluctant discharge of his imposed mission. Then there is that surprising complaint about the G-d who is too kind and too merciful for Yonah's liking.

Would it surprise you to learn that this book is widely thought of as arguably being one of the most profound and meaningful prophetic books?

Many beautiful approaches to exposition of Yonah have been offered throughout the ages, and we will review some of them in the upcoming lectures. We will proceed from the assumption that this work speaks to the central issues that every spiritually attuned man and woman faces in the very framework of life. What is life but a dynamic of encounter between G-d and man, the Divine intrusion into our routine and His demands on our very soul, especially when He refuses to take our advice about how to run the world. Perforce we are born and perforce do we live our lives. There are those sensitive souls who struggle with this truth every day of their lives. For others, it comes to fore at time of crisis. All men are tested, if they only live long enough. For some it may be unexpected prosperity, for others a difficult divorce, a loss of a loved one, an unexpected illness. Jarring experiences take us out of the daily routine; events impact on us unexpectedly, seemingly randomly, seemingly without purpose or meaning. There is meaning but we rather not see it, not act according to its imperative. So much do we wish to keep Him out... but He refuses to go away. He keeps on demanding, he again and again shatters our smug self-sufficiency, our comfortable illusions, our pretenses of who we think we are, of what we think He should be. Psychological denial, spiritual preconceptions, intellectual complacency - how do we insist on retaining them, how hard we fight to hold on to them. Like Yonah we attempt to escape Hashem's Presence; like him, we hold in our hands the choice of resisting, escaping, running away... or engaging, growing, submitting and being, in the process, redeemed and reborn.

Like Job, Yonah could not agree with the manner in which G-d conducted His world. While the book of Job (with which Yonah shares many structural and philosophical parallels) presents his problem with the Attribute of Justice, Yonah could not abide the Attribute of Mercy. This prophet would have much preferred a world just a bit more organized, more certain and predictable, a world where the

wicked suffer certain retribution and the righthouse receive immediate reward - a world that functioned more according to the rules and without the redundancies and paradoxes that are found all around us. At the end, the prophet had to experience pity and in his own feelings and emotions discover the echo of Divine Mercy.

But... learning this is not a one time event, it is a process, it is a dynamic. Yonah emerged with gratitude and praise from the belly of the fish, thinking that he had been reborn and redeemed, and yet, he was still resisting. There was still unfinished business, there were yet other layers of denial to pierce and more shells of self-delusion to be shattered in the crucible of future trials. The lessons were not yet finished, there was more schooling still to come.

Our tool in this process of exploration will be, among others, the principle of intertextuality, which can be defined as the assumption that Biblical authors and their intended audience were conversant with and fully familiar with the entire corpus of Biblical writing and the ideas and typology of other books of Tanach. It follows, therefore, that they skillfully utilized references to context, thought and idiom, construction and literary patterns found in other Biblical works. Always, the words of our Sages will serve as signposts upon this quest. This methodology, a mainstay of midrashic analysis, will guide us beyond the apparent disjointed meaning of individual phrases to the deeper intended significance of the Holy text. More importantly, it will uncover for us significance that we can apply to our own lives in the here and now. No longer will we be reading a peculiar little story of a prophet and a whale in a far away time and place; now it will become an intensely personal document for application and relevance to our own lives.

Let us then journey together along with Yonah. Let us descend into the heart of Jewish religious experience along with the man who sought to escape from G-d only to find Him and to reconcile with Him in the heart of the seas - "a compassionate and gracious G-d, abounding in kindness and repenting of evil". "Then he fell on his face and said: Conduct Your world according to the attribute of Mercy, as it is written: To the L-rd our G-d belongs mercy and forgiveness (Dan. 9:9)". ( Midrash Yonah)

Let us embark on the study of the Sefer Yonah.

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