

FALSE REFUGE [YONAH 1:3]

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

He paid its value and went down into it to come with them to Tarshish from before the L-rd (1:3).

"Since it is self-evident that Jonah is traveling with the ship's crew, the superfluous "with them" must be meant to express the existential isolation of one who carries the word of the L-rd and to find acceptance as just one more member of society (JPS Bible Commentary, Jonah)."

Beyond this, by repeating that Yonah was running away with "them", the verse indicates to us that the seamen on the way to Tarshish were a part of his escape. The dynamics of the situation were surely complex. Yonah found his escape for Hashem in the company of the sailors but it is also apparent that they willingly, though perhaps not fully consciously, aided him in this goal. He came to them with love in his heart and they reciprocated. Yonah entered the ship eyeing benevolently this new society of his, this new family in which he were to spend the next several years of his life. This determination to become one of them, the love and affection with which his heart must have overflowed at that moment undoubtedly explains the otherwise surprising loyalty, even devotion that these seamen would soon show to him at a time of danger to their very lives. "As reflection of face to face in water so is heart of man to man (Proverbs 27,19)."

The heartfelt commitment of a man of Yonah's sincerity and stature must have been not only readily apparent but powerful as well. As we will see over the course of next several weeks, it began for the sailors a process of inner growth that is perceptible as the story unfolds. To gain a sense of what being "with them" means, let us consider a well-known Rabbinic comment on the same expression in the story of Joseph and the wife of Potiphar.

"And it was as she spoke to him day after day, he would not listen to her to lie next to her to be with her (Genesis 39:10)." "To be with her - in the world to come (Sotah 3a)". To be with her means to share her fate for eternity. To be with a woman means to "cling to her" (Genesis 3:24) to the exclusion of anyone else. It signifies a covenant and a commitment which is forever. Yonah, in his heart, made such a commitment and, when push came to shove, the sailors reciprocated.

In a wider sense, this illustrates that the no one escapes G-d into nothingness. Wherever we may run, our first stop on the escape route is almost always relationships. Just look around- in our society romantic love has almost totally displaced the quest for G-d. So much effort and energy is expended in this often fruitless and almost always meaningless search - all to fill in the aching in the

heart for the one true object of our love Who we have betrayed for reasons, sometimes honorable and at other times despicable or childish. And if it is not love of a woman, it is a political affiliation, a professional society, perhaps even a charitable association. We follow causes in which we do not fully believe and profess loyalties that we do not fully share, all in order to be with other humans and to belong and exchange commitment with other similarly affected sufferers. What a sorry travesty, what a powerful and deplorable self-delusion! The unbearable loneliness demands a cure, and other humans are a ready substitute. This exchange of what is eternal and all-powerful for short lived alliances built on the shifting sands of mutual need is what the prophets address in the the following immortal lines (Isaiah 2:22): "Cease ye from man whose breath is in his nostrils for in what way is he of value?" "Be astonished, O ye heavens, at this and be horribly afraid, be ye very desolate, says the L-rd. For two evils has my people committed; they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living water to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns, that will not hold water (Jeremaia 2:12-13)."

Hashem did not permit Yonah to find refuge in the company of men. He sent a storm that will tear him away from that false refuge to face existential loneliness alone. The sailors, having been exposed to a spiritual reality they never imagined existed, will continue, changed, on their way while Yonah will undergo a rebirth in the belly of the fish and emerge having re- engaged his Maker in the heart of the seas.

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