

THE IMPACT OF GREATNESS [YONAH 1:4]

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

Before we begin this week's lesson, I must offer a clarification of the previous lesson - False Refuge. The intent therein was not to, G-d forbid, denigrate relationships with other people or to imply that they are extraneous or harmful to proper worship. On the contrary, Judaism demands that internalized spirituality be carried into and exercised through everyday activities within the community of men. Rather, what was addressed is using other humans as a refuge, to better escape the demands of sincere engagement with the Almighty. One must not run away from G-d to relationships; rather one must pursue a sincere and abiding pursuit of Hashem and his teachings and then establish family and society on proper religious foundation.

Now to this week's lesson.

What would it be like for an average person to meet a prophet? Would his elevated spiritual stature be immediately recognizable; would we perceive the "the Divine Presence" that rests upon him? Would we be moved or shaken by the palpable sanctity that emanates from a person of G-d?

I think that the answer to this question can only be offered by those who have met spiritually advanced people, no longer to be taken for granted in our day, place and age. Had you been fortunate to have spoken, confided in or be affected by such an individual, I am certain that your answer would have been unquestioningly affirmative. The charisma and the sense of purity and transcendence that envelope a sincere servant of G-d cannot be communicated in words but only through experience. It something that is sensed by everyone around him or her.

The Tanakh describes many meetings between prophets and other individuals that typify this fact. Among them, in Kings II:8 is a portrayal of the effect that an anonymous prophet had upon a group of military leaders and generals, leading to coronation of Yehu. The Sages in Sifri Zuta 14:34, quoted by Rashi inform us that this prophet was Yonah.

Let us read this passage together.

"And Elisha the prophet called one of the sons of the prophets, and said unto him: 'Gird up thy loins, and take this vial of oil in thy hand, and go to Ramoth-gilead. And when thou comest thither, look out there Jehu the son of Jehoshaphat the son of Nimshi, and go in, and make him arise up from among his brethren, and carry him to an inner chamber...

"So the young man, even the young man the prophet, went to Ramoth-gilead. And when he came,

behold, the captains of the host were sitting; and he said: 'I have an errand to thee, O captain.' And Jehu said: 'Unto which of us all?' And he said: 'To thee, O captain.'

"And he arose, and went into the house; and he poured the oil on his head, and said unto him: 'Thus saith HaShem, the G-d of Israel: I have anointed thee king over the people of HaShem, even over Israel. And thou shalt smite the house of Ahab thy master, that I may avenge the blood of My servants the prophets, and the blood of all the servants of HaShem, at the hand of Jezebel.... And he opened the door, and fled. Then Jehu came forth to the servants of his lord; and one said unto him: 'Is all well? wherefore came this mad fellow to thee?' And he said unto them: 'Ye know the man and what his talk was.' And they said: 'It is false; tell us now.' And he said: 'Thus and thus spoke he to me, saying: Thus saith HaShem: I have anointed thee king over Israel.' Then they hastened, and took every man his garment, and put it under him on the top of the stairs, and blew the horn, saying: 'Jehu is king.'"

Yehu was sitting in a company of his equals, all accomplished military leaders, all captains of large companies, men who had seen their share of heroism, treachery, suffering and defeat - men not easily impressed. Yet, as soon as they saw Yonah, they were stricken with a premonition for they saw that he was not a common person. They immediately recognize greatness and they knew that this man did not come to them for trivial purposes. Note how they attempt to draw this realization in mockery and scorn, calling the messenger a madman, denying the importance of his message. Yet, as soon as Yehu shares it with them, they know, they know that this was a prophet of G-d. Immediately and unanimously they embark on a dangerous and uncertain rebellion and void their previously secure allegiance to the king to crown one who was previously their equal. Such was the impression that the "mad fellow" made upon this group.

Now, imagine the effect that Yonah must have had upon the captain and sailors of that ship. And what a scene must it have been. The unexpected storm blows them off course into a small provincial port and there waiting for them is a most unusual man, the likes of whom they have never seen before. A man of wealth and privilege, a man whose face is shining with spiritual splendor, he hires the entire boat and immediately they sail. From whom is such a man escaping and why is he in such a hurry? Is it the king of Israel, the King of Assyria, or perhaps, someone greater than mere mortals? As they embark upon their voyage they sense that they are no longer a part of ordinary reality but of some great and immensely important drama. Moreover, under his influence they find themselves experiencing strivings and longings that they had never known before. By the hour, they are elevated. It is no wonder that they single him out from all the other passengers when the unusual and unexpected storm threatens their vessel.

The impact and impression the Yonah made upon the sailors goes a long way toward explaining their behavior toward him, of which we will treat in the coming weeks.

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