

# DASHED EXPECTATIONS [YONAH 1:5]

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

*(1:4) But HaShem placed a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was like to be broken.*

The beginning of our verse tells of a calm and stable situation. His escape apparently successful, his ship out on the high seas, his new community accepting and responsive, Yonah finally finds the peace that he so craved. But, as so often in life, G-d intervenes and denies the prophet the escape that he so eagerly sought. He unerringly strikes at the very pillars that supported Yonah's escape; he removes precisely that upon which Yonah relied.

Yonah set up for himself a cozy little refuge as following:

- 1.** "(Yonah said:) I escape to the sea, place where His Glory is not found" (Pirke D'Rabbi Eliezer)". Yonah thought that he would be safe at sea; correspondingly, "And Hashem placed a great wind unto the sea...". The Sages tell us (see Radak) that this storm surrounded the ship from all sides while, at the same time, other ships passed unmolested all around it. The miraculous nature of this storm is supported by the unusual phrasing (placed a great storm), and the sailors casting of lots. Casting lots is not the usual way of dealing with a storm. Clearly these expert survivors of many a sea trouble saw something unique and very different in this one.
- 2.** "...and there was a mighty tempest". We had in the past discussed the fact that unexpressed prophecy burns like fire within a prophet, giving him no rest, overwhelming his senses, his sense of propriety, at times even his compliance with the habits and customs of men (see Yirmia 20, 9). It is probably this feature of prophecy that accounts for the frequent perception by the uninitiated that prophets are "madmen". We do not know whether the agitation ever abates in someone who consciously refuses to answer his prophetic call. What is clear is that the storm outside mirrored and reinforced the tempest inside. The raging and storming of which we read represents the inner psychological state of the hapless prophet, again caught in Almighty's grasp.
- 3.** Yonah had found solace and succor in the company of the seafarers and now this refuge was in danger for "...the boat thought itself at the point of breaking". As the commentators (Radak and Ibn Ezra) point out, the device of using an inanimate objects to refer to sentient beings is fairly common. In our case it means that all the people in the boat recognized its imminent destruction. The description of sailors as "the boat" also points out the high level of unity that they achieved under Yonah's influence; no longer a ragged band of sailors from all over the world, the men were now the

boat and the boat became the men.

What would we expect Yonah to do? Will he cry out to G-d in prayer? Will he admit that he was wrong? Will he promise to obey from now on and forever? Yonah did none of these.

The psychologists teach us that denial is one of the most powerful qualities of the mind. Those in the helping professions tell and retell most remarkable and surprising stories of their experiences with its the power and range in the face of most undeniable evidence. The ability of the human mind to completely ignore all evidence contrary to its cherished assumptions and beliefs does not cease to amaze and perplex. Not even the greatest storm and most evident and present danger is guaranteed to move some individuals from their moorings. The destruction and unraveling of Yonah's plan was complete. In but a few minutes his refuge is to be no more. How does the prophet react?

*"...and Yonah descended to the depths of the vessel and he went to sleep (1:5)."*

This enigmatic passage occasioned much surprise and many explanations over the ages. Imagine, a rolling boat, clanging chains and shouting men, the roaring waves and the cracking of wood - and Yonah goes to sleep?

Let us for a moment consider the significance sleeping under these circumstances. I think it obvious that sleep in this situation represents withdrawal. This prophet who, unlike other prophets did not argue with G-d, who ran away from the challenge, again retreated. Where there is no physical escape, there always remains an option to escape into dreams. When reality cannot be denied, fantasy can still take its place. It is for nothing that the boat is now called 'sfinah', the only occurrence of this word in the Tanakh. This word is related to the Hebrew root "sfn" - hidden, covered, obscured. It is the most appropriate word to use for one who descends into the "sfina" to escape.

We have barely begun to explore the meaning of Yonah's sleep. There is much more that needs to be said about it and it will be said in the coming lessons. What should begin to be coming in sight, however, is the relationship between denial and repentance. As Yonah's story unfolds, we encounter the intertwining of withdrawal and engagement, denial of fault and admission of sin, sleep/ death and rebirth/ redemption. Over the tapestry of the raging ocean we will begin to see the awesome towering presence of the prophet Elijah. The Sages say that Yonah was the son of the Zorephite woman, born through his blessing and by his breath revived from the dead (See the discussion in Abarbanel to 3:4 and Kings I,17). We will see and analyze how Elija responded to the apparent defeat of his mission, when everything he had worked for seemed to be lost. (For those who cannot wait, you can peak into Kings, 18:4-5). Of course, these men were immeasurably greater than we; yet, We will learn that being a prophet was not easy and that on their much higher spiritual level they also struggled and we will discover in the lives of prophets lessons for us today.

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