

FROM SAILORS TO MEN [YONAH 1:5-26]

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

"And the sailors were afraid, and cried every man unto his god; and they cast forth the vessels that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it unto them. But Jonah was gone down into the innermost parts of the ship; and he lay, and was fast asleep.

"So the shipmaster came to him, and said unto him: 'What meanest thou that thou sleepest? arise, call upon thy G-d, if so be that G-d will think upon us, that we perish not.'

"And they said every one to his fellow: 'Come, and let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil is upon us.' So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah.

"Then said they unto him: 'Tell us, we pray thee, for whose cause this evil is upon us: What is thine occupation? And whence comest thou? What is thy country? And of what people art thou?' And he said unto them: 'I am an Hebrew; and I fear HaShem, the G-d of heaven, who hath made the sea and the dry land.' Then were the men exceedingly afraid, and said unto him: 'What is this that thou hast done?' For the men knew that he fled from the presence of HaShem, because he had told them. Then said they unto him: 'What shall we do unto thee, that the sea may be calm unto us?' for the sea grew more and more tempestuous. And he said unto them: 'Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you; for I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you.'

"Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring it to the land; but they could not; for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. Wherefore they cried unto HaShem, and said: 'We beseech Thee, O HaShem, we beseech Thee, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not upon us innocent blood; for Thou, O HaShem, hast done as it pleased Thee.' So they took up Jonah, and cast him forth into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared HaShem exceedingly; and they offered a sacrifice unto HaShem, and made vows (1:5-16)."

Many years ago I learned how to read Biblical texts from Nechama Liebowitz of blessed memory, one of the most influential Jewish exponents of Tanach in our generation. Among the many important skills and principles that I was fortunate to receive from this most remarkable teacher was her exhortation to be always aware of titles and epithets and how descriptions change and evolve with the passage of the narrative. Nechama emphasized that close attention to this particular feature of Biblical storytelling always produces great benefits in understanding the intended message. She described this feature of her method in small collection published in Hebrew, Lilmod Ulelamed Tanach, a short summary of which is available in English called [To Study and to Teach: The](#)

Methodology of Nechama Liebowitz, by Shmuel Peerless, Urim Publications, Jerusalem 2004.

The portrayal of the sailors in verses 5 - 16 demonstrates their rapid evolution from sailors to persons to a united collective to men of stature.

5. *And the sailors were afraid...*

7. *And they said every one to his fellow: 'Come, and let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil is upon us.*

13. *Nevertheless the men rowed hard...*

16. *Then the men feared HaShem exceedingly; and they offered a sacrifice unto HaShem, and made vows.*

In every land and time, sailors are known for loutishness, coarseness and bad morals. When men cut themselves off from their family, community and country, their ethics and behavior inevitably deteriorate. So also this group of mariners started out being called sailors. We have previously posited that when Yonah came on board "to journey with them to Tarshish away from Hashem", he eagerly joined this small maritime community, which, under his indirect influence, experienced a spiritual revolution. We must keep in mind that at this point no one knew who Yonah was, from which nation he had come or which god he worshipped. Without consciously becoming aware of their inner change, the sailors rose to a spiritual level so high that the first thing that they did when the tempest struck was to pray. You would surely agree that this is not how sailors usually respond to a storm. Only later did they throw objects overboard in order to lighten the ship.

As the storm worsened, they, all as one, willingly shared the terrible responsibility of casting lots and they apparently accepted the consequences of this action. Someone was going to be selected and possibly ejected from the ship and die. The captain and probably the sailors too certainly must have had a pretty good idea of who was responsible for their plight.

"So the shipmaster came to him, and said unto him: 'What meanest thou that thou sleepest? Arise, call upon thy G-d, if so be that G-d will think upon us, that we perish not.' And they said every one to his fellow: 'Come, and let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil is upon us.' So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah."

But the men loved Yonah, for now they dimly recognized how his presence has changed them, and they sought to protect him with all their might. At that point, they feared G-d more than they feared death. They would rather die than...

"And he said unto them: 'Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you; for I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you.'"

Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring it to the land; but they could not; for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. Wherefore they cried unto HaShem, and said: 'We beseech Thee, O HaShem, we beseech Thee, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not upon us innocent blood; for Thou, O HaShem, hast done as it pleased Thee.' "

Was Yonah innocent? Surely, they now knew that he was guilty, and how! Yet, love covers all sins. Their teacher, their mentor, the purest person they ever had known was about to be taken away from them and they could not make peace with that. They could not even bring themselves to put him in chains and bring him perforce to Nineveh. As soon as he be gone, they would revert to an existence they could no longer accept, to a life bereft of spiritual strivings, the life of outsiders to the G-d of Israel.

"Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring it to the land; but they could not; for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them." The Sages in Pirke D'Rabbi Eliezer 10 tell us that they would put Yonah into the sea and it would grow calm. They then pulled him up and it would rage again. They did this three times, first to his knees, then to his chest, finally to his neck. Finally, they had no choice and they placed him gingerly into the sea.

"Then the men feared HaShem exceedingly; and they offered a sacrifice unto HaShem, and made vows."

"The sailors turned their ship around and went to Jerusalem and converted (ibid)".

Here is the paradox of a great man who fails and in this very act of failing inspires others. Even dying embers can start a fire. The irony is that as Yonah was being cast out, the mariners were coming in. But the prophet gave no heed. His heart and mouth were closed to prayer. He would not respond to his call and he would not call to G-d, even to save himself. The word "call (KRA)" is a "key word" in this passage as it repeats seven times. Yonah felt that he was right in rejecting G-d's kindness and he was willing to die for his beliefs. He will now descend to the bottom of the sea while his erstwhile companions will go up the mountain of the L-rd. The silence of the sea will envelope him and there he will find his voice. He will emerge from the belly of the fish shouting.

And he said: I called out of mine affliction unto HaShem, and He answered me; out of the belly of the nether-world cried I, and Thou heardest my voice (2:1). But I will sacrifice unto Thee with the voice of thanksgiving; that which I have vowed I will pay. Salvation is of HaShem (2:10).

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