

ELIAHU AND YONAH [YONAH 1:5]

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

Before we explore the main topic of this week's lecture, I share an exchange with a member of this chabura.

Question: Why does Yonah tell the men to throw him overboard when he, in effect, makes these good men murderers? Why does he not jump off himself?

It is a great question. Some commentators (see Malbim) in fact, say that Yonah descended into the bottom of the ship so that he is killed first when the water pours in and the others will then be saved.

I would suggest that the issue goes deeper. We should ask why, in the first place, the sailors were being threatened with death because Yonah was on the ship; they certainly did not do anything wrong?

The answer is, I think, along the lines that we have been developing here. Once Yonah joined this little society and even became its spirit and inspiration, all its members were now responsible and guarantors for one another. They all could be held culpable for his sins. This is why they had to disengage from him and eject him from their group. He could have jumped overboard but it would not have freed them for they needed to be set free from association with him.

Now to the subject of today's lesson.

And Yonah descended into the bottom of the ship and went into deep slumber (1:5).

What is the meaning of this strange reaction to the events taking place on the deck above? The tempest growth stronger and fiercer, the ship rocks and groans, the wood splinters and the sails flap and come apart. Here below, Yonah lays himself to sleep and falls into deep slumber. How could one fall asleep under such circumstances? Was this a result of emotional exhaustion or was it the last escape of a man who had nowhere else to run? Certain commentators (Mahri Kara) suggest that what is described here as sleep is profound and utter depression that enveloped Yonah as gloom settled over his mind and heart. A man of highest caliber, of profound spiritual and intellectual gifts, he was finally and completely bested. All rationalizations and theories crushed, all rebellious romanticism melted away before the might of the storm and He who sent it. Now, all illusions fell away. He was but a puny human being, a nothing before the grandeur of the Master of Nature. Sleep was death and death was the only remaining escape. As the storm howled outside, Yonah sought death and he found refuge in slumber, its closest cousin (I am indebted to S. Peters in her Learning

to Read Midrash, Urim Publications, 2004 p. 66 and Y. Bachrach, see below, for this insight.)

His reaction was not all that unusual. Consider how Eliahu and Moshe responded in a somewhat similar set of circumstances. As we pointed out in the past, Yonah was not only a student of Eliahu but the child of the widow who he had revived from death. Eliahu literally breathed his spirit into the child (Kings I, 19). Is it surprising then that Yonah followed in his master's footsteps? The first one, to my knowledge to draw attention to this similarity was R. Dovid Luria in his classic commentary to Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer. He writes this (Ch. 10, 32): "That is, that in the suffering of his soul he he fell asleep, similar to what it says by Eliahu "and he asked his soul to die"... and he lay down and fell asleep under one of the bushes". You might want to review Class 3 at this point for more on the comparison of Yonah and Eliahu.

The motif of death and resurrection as it related to sin and repentance is important to understanding the message of the entire book for that is precisely what Yonah is about to undergo - death at sea and rebirth in the belly of the fish. The Sages tell us that the fish was pregnant (see Radak), implying precisely this idea.

Here are the relevant verses form Kings I, 19.

Please recall that Eliahu escaped into the desert from the wicked queen Izevel after his great triumph over the priests of Baal. At pinnacle of his success, he suddenly lost everything. No one defended him; he had to run for his life and found himself alone in the desert. All his work seemingly for nought, all his efforts to bring Israel back to Hashem frustrated, he...

And when he saw that, he arose, and went for his life, and came to Beer- sheba, which belongeth to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom-tree; and he requested for himself that he might die; and said: 'It is enough; now, O HaShem, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers.' And he lay down and slept under a broom-tree; and, behold, an angel touched him, and said unto him: 'Arise and eat.'

Sleep as death.

It is interesting and significant that Moshe also asked for death when he experienced what must have appeared as complete failure of his prophetic mission (See Bamidbar 11:14-17). Though on the surface one might be tempted to understand this as merely a psychological reaction to extreme stress, underlying it are essential questions about repentance. We are quite used to the idea of repentance - tshuva as one of the basic ideas of Judaism but it is in truth completely illogical and seemingly against nature and common sense. In the words of Mesilas Yesharim (Ch.4): "For according to the Attribute of Justice, it would be fitting that the sinner be immediately punished and with full measure of wrath...for in truth, how can a man fix that which he already damaged and the sin had been done? Behold, he killed a man, he committed adultery, how can this be repaired? Can that which had been done be made to disappear from reality?" Yet, the Torah teaches us that it can and that it does. Without repentance there is nothing but death; with it one can repeatedly choose life. As

Rabbi Y. Bachrach points out in his classic "Yonah and Eliahu" (Mercaz Shapiro, 6th edition, 1984, p. 50) the relationship between Divine Mercy and Justice preoccupied all prophets "for it is at the pinnacle of how man recognizes G-d (in this world) and they were willing to give their life for it". This question is basic to understanding and internalizing the concept of repentance - how could one possibly correct that which is already done and long passed. There is a great mystery in man's ability to repent and rebuild and it translates into the same mystery as death and rebirth, G-d's Justice and His Mercy.

Though at the end of his road, with no hope in sight, Yonah did not give in for, as we explained in Class 4, he could not make peace with the world that run according to the Attribute of Kindness. "They asked Prophecy: How is sinner to be punished? It replied, "The person who sinned, he shall die (Ezek 18:4)." They asked the Holy One Blessed be He: "How is the sinner to be punished?". He answered: "Let him do repentance and I will accept it as it is written: "Good and upright is Hashem, therefore he will teach the sinners the way" (Yerushalmi Makkos 2:6, geniza version). The book of Yonah is first and foremost about this central question of religious life.

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