

THE EDUCATION OF YONAH [YONAH 1:6-16]

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

They said to him, "tell us because of this, evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? From where have you come? What is your country? From what nation are you? And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew and the L-rd G-d of heaven I fear, He who made the heaven and dry land (1:8-10)."

After the sailors ejected Yonah, a "great fish" swallowed him. Three days in the belly of the fish and Yonah finally opened his mouth and praised Hashem. That psalm of thanks giving is one of only three places where we find Yonah actually saying something of personal nature; the first place is here and the last when he complains to G-d at the conclusion of the book.

We might have expected that inside the fish, the reluctant prophet finally realizes where he had gone wrong, acknowledges his sins and repents fully. What a conventional writer would do at this point is have Yonah confess and Hashem save him because of his repentance. But, this is not how the Bible works; life is more complex than that and so is also the Scripture. To our surprise, Yonah admits nothing and asks for nothing (you may quickly read through Chapter 2 to confirm this fact). He elaborately praises G-d but does not speak to Him. The "poor fit" between what we would expect at that juncture and what actually happens provoked much deplorable critical activity in recent times.

To understand the function and nature of this psalm, which we will, G-d willing, discuss at greater length later, let us focus on what Yonah says now and what that teaches us about his situation at this point in time. It appears that he learned certain truths from his experience and we find them expressed in response to the sailors' queries.

What was asked of him is, in truth, the kind of questions that the world asks all of us. The view out there is that people are products of their environment, education and conditioning. The mariners met in Yonah a kind of man they have never encountered. They assumed that he must have come from some race of spiritual giants of which they heretofore simply had not known. Perhaps he was a clergyman of some kind and his work made him what he was. Or, may it had been the surroundings in which he grew up, some enchanted land of mysticism and spirituality, some sort of holy city or a mountain on which gods reside. From where have you come? What is your country? From what nation are you?

It is a tribute to how deeply Yonah affected the sailors that even at this time of extreme danger they are more interested in who he is than in how to save their own skins. "Who are you, the man of

splendor and mystery, and what are your powers that have changed us so?"

Whatever the answer, it would obligate them to nothing. After all, they did not come from that land and did not do his kind of work. He was what he was because of how he grew up and we are what we are because of our antecedents. At least, that is what they hoped to hear from him.

Yonah understood all this and he did not answer them as they expected. He did not even tell them that he was a Jew, for that would play right into their pre-existent assumption. Instead he described himself in terms of the general region, a Hebrew, or as one would say these days - Middle Easterner. He told them that he became who he was because he worshipped the One Maker of the world. They could also do so and become great. Right away - "And the men feared a great fear (v. 10)", "and the men feared a great fear of Hashem (v. 16)."

The point of this answer was not to explain that he was running away from G-d. That he told them shortly thereafter, "for the men realized that he is escaping from Hashem for he told them (v. 10)." That verse demonstrates that his words to the sailors were not about "why has this evil come upon us" but an answer to another question, implied but not stated. As he responded, Yonah was still engaged in attempting to better them. At the same time, he summarized what he himself had learned.

What had Yonah learned?

He thought that he could escape G-d at sea. Now he realizes that G-d made "the sea and the dry land". He thought that he could leave Hashem behind. Now he knew that he will always fear and revere Him, for that is who Yonah is. He thought that he could melt into the international community of sea-men. Now he learned "I am a Hebrew".

Yonah understood that he is essentially a religious man who can never separate himself from his spiritual roots. We might say that he embarked on the classic path of religious discovery - form within outward. His experience at sea changed him. He no longer had illusions of escaping from himself, of joining the great heaving masses of undifferentiated and materialistic humanity. He knew now well that his portion in life was to serve the Creator - only, he still did not understand Him and did not agree with His management of this world. How can one serve a Master with who he disagrees? How does one love a woman who angers and provokes him? Is it not by marshalling all the memories of the sweet times in the past, the love that was and all the good that his spouse still deals him. That is the central thread of prophetic literature in books such as Hoshea and Yirmiah and there we find G-d alternating between His wrath over Israel's wickedness and His recollection of their faithfulness in the past. True, within the belly of the fish Yonah was reborn. Yet, he still did not understand why and for what purpose. He still felt compelled and still not of the same mind as the One who sent him. Yonah opened his mouth and praised Hashem's kindness and thus had the re-approachment began. So also, G-d responded to Yonah's efforts and He commanded the fish to spit him onto the dry land but he did not respond in words. Yonah will go on Hashem's mission but not

yet with a full heart. The Wise One will also wait for the right moment to open his prophet's heart.

Yona's education has just began. It is only at the end of his mission when he confronts G- directly that he receives an explanation. At this point of the story, however, Yonah is becoming ready to listen for he now recognizes that for him there is no other way.

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