

QUESTION ANSWER AND REVIEW [YONAH 1: CONCLUSION]

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

I have been teaching Sefer Yonah several years. There are some questions with which I struggle every year as I teach the subject.

My first question is: Commentators tell us that Yonah ran away from Israel because he knew that he would not get prophecy outside of the land of Israel. But he did get it in Ninveh in the third chapter, and other prophets also got prophecy outside of Israel, such as Yirmiyahu and Yechezkel.

Can you explain this apparent discrepancy?

I am honored that an experienced teacher would find new insights in this lecture series. At the same time I appreciate you sharing this basic and very important question with us, for it allows us to review some of the issues so far as we conclude the first chapter of Yonah. You may want to review some of the lectures at the archives at <http://www.torah.org/learning/yonah>.

The book of Yonah is like a labyrinth with many hidden passageways, rest stops, nooks and crannies, and intersecting paths. It is the job of the interpreter to bind the various strands together and to uncover the message within. One cannot hope to begin to succeed upon this task without setting forward the working assumptions and clarifying the methodology to be employed. Among these the most important is: What is the main message of Yonah?

Several different answers to this question have been expressed over the ages. An excellent discussion of advantages and disadvantages of these approaches can be found in a book length essay, A. Rivlin, Yonah: Nevua V'Tochacha, published by Yeshiva Kerem B'Yavne, 1999 on pp.64-85. They are:

1. An epistle of national repentance. The view that the book of Yonah is a call to repentance is found in numerous Midrashic passages. The Sages explain that Yonah runs away because he did not want his people to fail. "Yonah said: I know that the nations are quick to repent. Now they will repent and the Holy One Blessed be He will send his anger against Israel... I shall run away instead (Pirke D.Rabbi Eliezer Ch. 10)." "Yonah said: I will go outside of the Land of Israel, to a place where the Divine Presence is not revealed, so as not to render Israel guilty (Mekhilta of R. Ishmael, Pischa,1)." The commentators, such as, Metsudat, understand it to mean: "place where prophecy does not rest upon the prophets", setting the stage for the question that you ask.

It is important to realize that there exists another version of this statement, "to the sea, place where

the Divine Presence does not rest". As explained in Class 6: Of Rebels [Yonah 1:2-3], Yonah thought that G-d is found only in places where human beings live, in order that they may sense his Presence and be drawn toward Him. He thought that at sea he might escape the awareness that disturbed and agitated him. According to this version, your question does not even arise.

Rashi, however, conflates the two versions. It seems to me that an answer would build on Class 4: Running Away [Yonah 1:2]. Briefly, we explained there that Yonah was not prepared to accept and understand the message that he could not accept. Thus, all he heard was a command to go to Nineveh and prophesize there. Because his heart was closed at that time (please see the original lesson for an explanation of how this relates to the mechanics of receiving prophecy), he did not fully understand the message. In actuality he ran away from himself, so as not to acknowledge the command that he already carried within him. This is supported by Yevomos 78b where the second command to Yonah in 3:1 is explained to be the same one as in 1:1.

As such, his escape was not from prophecy but from himself. In fact, if not so, how could Yonah run away from the prophecy that he had already received?

The question of Ezekiel and other prophets has been dealt with in classical sources; some of them discuss the question of Yonah as well as Moshe, who also began his prophetic career outside of the Land of Israel. Due to space limitation I will simply list them for farther study: Moed Katan 25a; Moreh Nevukhim II, 36 and Shmone Perakim, 7; Abarbanel, Introduction to Amos; Radvaz Responsa 2, 842 and 6, 2206, Kuzari 2, 14. Those interested are invited to email me personally for elaboration.

2. Universalism versus Particularism. We did not adopt this approach for reasons explained in Class 17: Jews and Gentiles[Yonah 1:6-16].

3. To teach about Repentance. While this is an important motif within the story (see Megilah 31a and Taanit 16a), it does not appear, at least to me, to have sufficient explanatory power to satisfactorily encompass and account for many details in Chapter 1 and 2 that do not relate directly to repentance. In addition, it would be peculiar for a book centered on repentance to offer us only examples of flawed and incomplete repentance. Neither Yonah nor the people of Nineveh ever repented fully, as we will discuss in the future.

4. Justice versus Mercy. This approach was first offered by R. Yehoshua Ibn Shoeb, a 14th century rabbinic scholar, whose sermons have only recently been published. He writes: "The prophecy of Yonah came to teach that the Almighty has mercies for all his creatures, even the nations of the world (who rebel against Him), certainly the people of Israel.... We learn from this work that G-d is merciful; even though the nations stole and conducted themselves with great violence, G-d accepted their repentance. So certainly we, the nation of his amity and the sheep of his pasture ... (Cited in S. Y. Agnon, The High Holidays; Daas Mikra , Intoduction to Yonah #7; Y. Bachrach, Yonah V' Eliahu, p. 75). It appears to be based on Midrash Yonah, ed, Jellinek, p. 102. This is the approach that we have adopted in this series. Please see Class 2: Yonah, the Prophet.

While the national message is of utmost importance and is rightly stressed by the classical commentators, the approach that sees Yonah as one struggling with the concept of Divine Mercy as foundation of life and faith, speaks directly to modern man, who so often feels alienated from history, community and, even himself. Our struggle so often is to draw from within that which our forefathers effortlessly absorbed from their mother's milk and the sounds, smells and customs of their community. Modern man is in flight from himself and from his inheritance; to a great degree because he or she does not perceive the Mercy behind the Creation. Surely, Hashem also has a message for our times in His Book. It is almost a miracle that Scripture has something to say to every type of person, in every historical circumstance and situation, a consequence of Divine Inspiration that breathes from its pages.

At the conclusion of Chapter I, Yonah has learned that he cannot run away from G-d for He is in his blood. He is a Jew and a prophet and he cannot escape his destiny on either count (see Class 18: The Education of Yonah [Yonah 1:6-16] and Class 11: False Refuge [Yonah 1:3]). He still, however, does not agree that the Quality of Mercy should run the world. As many of us, he could not figure out how to translate knowledge into inner change. But... G-d knows what we need. He sent Yonah a refuge and a womb within which to be reborn.

And G-d sent a great fish to swallow Yonah and Yonah was in the womb of the fish three days and three nights (2,1).

Praise and thanks to Hashem who allowed and assisted us to finish the first chapter of Yonah.

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