

THE LIBERATION [YONAH 2]

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

We left last lesson with the indelible image of Yonah confined in the belly of pregnant fish, enveloped in roe packs, in discomfort and pain but poised for a spiritual leap. This key image of a person within a fish demands elaboration. Instinctively we sense that there is special power and significance to this image; yet, we hardly begin to glimpse its meaning. Modern man is far removed from his heritage and estranged from the symbolic world of Biblical imagery and archetype. The image of a man within a fish does not speak to us; in fact, it only bewilders and confuses. Not a few readers when they come to this point in the narrative quietly scratch their heads and say: "Now, what's all this about?"

We will attempt to unlock significance by invoking a parallel, perhaps more accessible passage, as well as the symbolism and sensibility of the Jewish mystical tradition. I must caution the reader that the point of the ensuing discussion is not the esoteric teachings themselves but their contribution to clarifying the meaning of 'Yonah and the fish'.

There is another story in the Bible of a man imprisoned within an animal. In both stories, the character praises Hashem and is then restored to his previous position. The man I have in mind is Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylonia.

Daniel Ch.4:

I Nebuchadnezzar was at rest in my house, and flourishing in my palace. I saw a dream which made me afraid; and imaginings upon my bed and the visions of my head affrighted me...

But at the last Daniel came in before me, whose name was Belteshazzar, according to the name of my god, and in whom is the spirit of the holy gods; and I told the dream before him... Thus were the visions of my head upon my bed: I saw, and behold a tree in the midst of the earth, and the height thereof was great. The tree grew, and was strong, and the height thereof reached unto heaven, and the sight thereof to the end of all the earth. The leaves thereof were fair, and the fruit thereof much, and in it was food for all; the beasts of the field had shadow under it, and the fowls of the heaven dwelt in the branches thereof, and all flesh was fed of it. I saw in the visions of my head upon my bed, and, behold, a watcher and a holy one came down from heaven.

He cried aloud, and said thus: Hew down the tree, and cut off its branches, shake off its leaves, and scatter its fruit; let the beasts get away from under it, and the fowls from its branches.

Nevertheless leave the stump of its roots in the earth, even in a band of iron and brass, in the tender grass of the field; and let it be wet with the dew of heaven, and let his portion be with the beasts in the grass of the earth;

Let his heart be changed from man's, and let a beast's heart be given unto him; and let seven times pass over him. The matter is by the decree of the watchers, and the sentence by the word of the holy ones; to the intent that the living may know that the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever He will, and setteth up over it the lowest of men... Then Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, was appalled for a while, and his thoughts affrighted him. The king spoke and said: 'Belteshazzar, let not the dream, or the interpretation, affright thee.' Belteshazzar answered and said: 'My lord, the dream be to them that hate thee, and the interpretation thereof to thine adversaries...

And whereas the king saw a watcher and a holy one coming down from heaven, and saying: Hew down the tree, and destroy it; nevertheless leave the stump of the roots thereof in the earth, even in a band of iron and brass, in the tender grass of the field; and let it be wet with the dew of heaven, and let his portion be with the beasts of the field, till seven times pass over him-- this is the interpretation, O king, and it is the decree of the Most High, which is come upon my lord the king, that thou shalt be driven from men, and thy dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field, and thou shalt be made to eat grass as oxen, and shalt be wet with the dew of heaven, and seven times shall pass over thee; till thou know that the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever He will.

And whereas it was commanded to leave the stump of the roots of the tree, thy kingdom shall be sure unto thee, after that thou shalt have known that the heavens do rule. Wherefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable unto thee, and break off thy sins by almsgiving, and thine iniquities by showing mercy to the poor; if there may be a lengthening of thy prosperity.' All this came upon the king Nebuchadnezzar. At the end of twelve months he was walking upon the royal palace of Babylon. The king spoke, and said: 'Is not this great Babylon, which I have built for a royal dwelling-place, by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?'

While the word was in the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven: 'O king Nebuchadnezzar, to thee it is spoken: the kingdom is departed from thee. And thou shalt be driven from men, and thy dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field; thou shalt be made to eat grass as oxen, and seven times shall pass over thee; until thou know that the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever He will.' The same hour was the thing fulfilled upon Nebuchadnezzar; and he was driven from men, and did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hair was grown like eagles' feathers, and his nails like birds' claws.

'And at the end of the days I Nebuchadnezzar lifted up mine eyes unto heaven, and mine understanding returned unto me, and I blessed the Most High, and I praised and honoured Him that

liveth for ever; for His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom from generation to generation; And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; and He doeth according to His will in the host of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay His hand, or say unto Him: What doest Thou? At the same time mine understanding returned unto me; and for the glory of my kingdom, my majesty and my splendour returned unto me; and my ministers and my lords sought unto me; and I was established in my kingdom, and surpassing greatness was added unto me. Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honour the King of heaven; for all His works are truth, and His ways justice; and those that walk in pride He is able to abase.'

The parallels to Yonah and the fish are clear. Now let us consult the esoteric writings.

The tale of a great soul captive within an animal body calls to mind the concept of the transmigration of the soul. Now, the teaching that some souls are given an opportunity to return to complete their earthly task is not our focus now. There were certainly great authorities that argued that this concept is not part of Jewish belief as well as many equally great ones who strongly upheld it. Similarly, there were those who accepted that a soul can take residence in a human body and others who believed that certain sins demand purification within animals, or even inanimate objects. This is not the forum to discuss this profound and deep subject. What is important to our purpose is the light that it can shed on the image of a man within the fish.

The Sefer Chareidim (quoted in Nishmas Chaim of R. Menashe ben Israel, 4:13) says: "The Holy One Blessed be He wished to demonstrate to humanity the possibility of transmigration into a body of an animal through the greatest of kings, the wicked Nebuchadnezzar. While he was alive, He brought him down from his throne and ejected him into a field. He walked on all fours like an animal and appeared like an animal for he had permitted his tongue go too far and spoke against the High One. After that, when the appointed period of Divine anger has ended, G-d brought him back and showed him that He is Almighty.."

The image of Yonah within the fish parallels that of a soul within its host. When the soul is purified, it is ready to rise. When Yonah began to repent he was ready to pray.

Among animals fish occupy the highest spiritual place. While kosher slaughter of cattle requires transecting both the esophagus and trachea and fowl require at least the trachea, fish are kosher without special slaughter. They are spared the pain of the slaughterer's knife. For this reason, the souls of the righteous who need to remedy but a minor fault are sent into fish (Ohr Hachaim to Genesis 1:26; Maor VaShemesh, notes to Chullin). This is also the reason why there arose a custom to especially eat fish on Friday nights (See sources in Z'miros Divrei Yoel).

The image of Yonah within the belly of the fish and of Nevuchadnezzar eating grass and living like a beast in the field is that of a high and holy soul imprisoned within the physical and animalistic. Though there may seem to be no escape out the morass of the material, these passages teach us that there is a way. It entails nothing more than recognizing the Creator and expressing his praise.

This recognition liberates from the pull of the material and frees us for our spiritual journey.

Yonah Ch.2

Then Jonah prayed unto HaShem his G-d out of the fish's belly. 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.

For Thou didst cast me into the depth, in the heart of the seas, and the flood was round about me; all Thy waves and Thy billows passed over me. And I said: 'I am cast out from before Thine eyes'; yet I will look again toward Thy holy temple.

The waters compassed me about, even to the soul; the deep was round about me; the weeds were wrapped about my head. I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars closed upon me for ever; yet hast Thou brought up my life from the pit, O HaShem my G-d. When my soul fainted within me, I remembered HaShem; and my prayer came in unto Thee, into Thy holy temple. They that regard lying vanities forsake their own mercy. But I will sacrifice unto Thee with the voice of thanksgiving; that which I have vowed I will pay. Salvation is of HaShem. And HaShem spoke unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land.

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