

FOOLISH HEARTS [YONAH 2]

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

The first lesson of spiritual life.

The holidays have passed and we return to our study of Yonah renewed and with a new spirit. Let us begin by briefly reviewing the last lesson.

We considered the structure of the psalm that constitutes the second chapter of the book of Yonah. The chapter itself follows a chiasmic structure that brings our attention to its meaning that resides in the center. It follows the pattern that we called A B C B' A', as follows:

Prologue: And HaShem prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

A. 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.

B. 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.

C. The waters compassed me about, even to the soul; the deep was round about me; the weeds were wrapped about my head.

B' 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.

A' 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.

Epilogue: And HaShem spoke unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land.

Compare B and B'.

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In the first version of his story, Yonah displays a curious forgetfulness. He seems to not remember that it was he himself who told the sailors to throw him overboard and not G-d who cast him into the depth. He does not recall that he is the one who run away from G-d and not vice versa.

When the prophet first went down into the sea he exemplified the all so common phenomenon. Who has not met people whose personal and character deficiencies wrecked their lives; yet, they remain full of anger at G-d and man. A person enveloped in this "victim mentality" cannot, simply is not able to repent, to turn back, to accept responsibility, to better his or her ways. The anger, the casting of blame, the lack of insight surround and imprison him. He sees G-d's waves of misfortune blocking his path. It is His fault, He does not deserve that I should give in to His willful injustice and abuse. I will obstinately remain where I stand; I'll show Him that I am more faithful than He, for despite Him I will look toward his Holy Temple. The self imposed barriers are ascribed to G-d and the anger at oneself is now His lot.

In the belly of the fish, Yonah has grown. Under the threat of death and dissolution, the emotion and pain dissipated and he became ready to take a dispassionate and objective look at his situation. His misfortunes - simply are. His redemption is of Hashem. Once we take responsibility for our own deeds, we can see G-d as what He always is - a Savior and giver of life. "I went down to the mountains - Thou has brought my life from the pit, Hashem my G-d... Salvation is of Hashem."

A Talmudic passage powerfully expresses this insight.

R. Yochanan found the child of Reish Lakish who was sitting and repeating: The foolishness of man makes crooked his way but against G-d his heart rages (Proverbs 19,3). R. Yochanan sat down and wondered: Is there something that is enunciated in the Writings that is not found in the Pentateuch? The child said to him: What, is it not alluded to? Is it not written in Genesis 42, 28: (and the brothers of Joseph who had just expressed some understanding that their suffering was in recompense for their betrayal of their brother Joseph))trembled one to the other and they said: What is this that G-d is doing to us?" (Taanis ga)

Such is the nature of man's self-delusion. He, O, so often blames others for what is really his own fault and is filled with rage and anger at those in whom resides his salvation.

We cannot grow if we do not realize this pervasive inclination of human psyche. The second chapter of Yonah teaches us how to cast barriers aside and how to go forward.

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