

# TOUCH AND GO.. BACK [YONAH 2: CONCLUSION]

*by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin*

The prayer of Yonah is full of contrasts. From heights to depths, from despair to exultation,...and from speaking directly to G-d to describing Him in third person. It is interesting that most of the psalm is in second person but indirect and descriptive sentences are found in the beginning, the middle and the end of Yonah's prayer. They are;

**3.** 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.

**8.** When my soul fainted within me, I remembered HaShem; and my prayer came in unto Thee, into Thy holy temple. **10.** But I will sacrifice unto Thee with the voice of thanksgiving; that which I have vowed I will pay. Salvation is of HaShem

The seesawing in prayer between second and third person mode of address is not only peculiar to the second chapter of Yonah but is a general feature of Jewish prayer. Our blessings usually start off directed to G-d - "Blessed are Thou...". However, they immediately veer away into the indirect and descriptive, for example - "the King of the Universe, who brings bread from the earth". The same is true of prayer. Students of Jewish liturgy often find the foreignness of free interchange of second and third person to be one of the most significant barriers to understanding and internalizing Jewish mode of worship. Is there something in this peculiarity that can help us to understand Yonah?

One of the earliest thinkers to take up this question was Rabbi Solomon ben Aderet, the Rashbo (d. 1310 A.C.E.). He writes in one of his letters: "You have known already that there are two foundations and everything is built on them. The first one is that G-d's existence is necessary and non-contingent, of which there can be no doubt. The second - that the full truth of His existence cannot be known by anyone other than Himself. He may appear as if existing in revealed reality but in truth His essence is hidden and unattainable to anyone. In order to impress upon us these two corner-stones of religion, they (the rabbis) set up the text of blessings to express both the revealed and the hidden. We begin with "Blessed are Thou" like a person who is talking to another person right in front of him. We then switch to "Who has commanded us with his ordinances..." - for the essence of his being is hidden and unattainable? (Responsa 5, 52, see also Ramban to Exodus 16, 26).

The Rashbo's thrust is pedagogical, not devotional. It remained for the kabbalistic masters to reveal the relevance of this liturgical phenomena to individual worship (Tanya 1,50; Tzidkas Hatzadik, 4). They drew upon the description of angels' service in Ezekiel 1,14 and 22 to conceptualize it in terms

of touching a profound reality and immediately withdrawing from it.

**14.** And the Chayos ran and returned as the appearance of a flash of lightning. **22.** And over the heads of the Chayos there was the likeness of a firmament, like the color of the terrible ice, stretched forth over their heads above.

Ezekiel describes a certain boundary above which G-d's Presence can be glimpsed. A type of advanced angels, called Chaos, can for a moment extend "their heads" above the barrier and glimpse something of this presence. Overawed and overwhelmed by what they see, they immediately withdraw and retreat. The whole process is blindingly quick, like a flash of lightning. The use of lightning imagery is significant for it brings to us the concept of spiritual insight as a brief but intense illumination which we can tolerate but for a moment. The power and brightness of this flush in the darkness ensures that we cannot hold on to it for long. However, armed with the memory of this glimpse we can return to the darkness of everyday life and illuminate the path upon which we must walk (Rambam, Introduction to the Guide).

The relevance of second and third person mode of address to Yonah is, I think, clear. The prophet began his prayer, alienated from his G-d, for he had ran away from Him. The flow of prayer brings him to the realization of his predicament and is able to raise his face to Him in prayer. Yet, bitterness is not fully gone and soon enough the alienation creeps back in; he finds that he cannot talk to G-d but only about Him. Still this is an immeasurable improvement over sullen silence. The seeds of repentance have sprouted and germinated. Although the prophet ends his prayer in third person, he accedes to G-d's will. The door has been opened and eventually he will deliver his complaint directly to Hashem's ear.

We are about to proceed to the second part of the book of Yonah. Much of what we are about to read can only been understood if we keep this fact in mind. We find Yonah oscillating between accepting and disobeying, reaching and retreating, understanding and obstinately negating.

It is difficult, truly difficult to break finally and decisively through the straightjacket of denial and self-delusion. Yonah knew that salvation comes from Hashem but he couldn't ask Him for it directly. He ended his prayer in third person: "Salvation is from the L-rd." So often we encounter people who seem aware of their faults and deficiencies and appear determined not to be entrapped by them and yet they are, over and over again. Slipping and rising, realizing and forgetting the insights so laboriously gained, life is, as R. Nachman of Brelov teaches, not a circle but a spiral. One rises and falls and rises and then finds oneself at the same point - only on a higher plane. Each person has his or her own test and they do not change in essence as one progresses spiritually. The challenge of small person may be his appetite; when he becomes a great saint he may instead lust after knowledge and wisdom. A kind of desire that may appear to a little person to be great righteousness, may be considered self-indulgence and a shortcoming for a saint. Our destiny is to face same challenges repeatedly; our goal is to elevate the level of life's challenges as high as our

strength allows.

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