

SLIPPING AWAY [YONAH 3:1-2]

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

The word of Hashem came to Yonah the second time: Arise and go to Nineveh, the great city and call to it the message that I speak to you. And Yonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of Hashem...(3:1-2)

At this third chapter of Yonah we find ourselves again at the beginning. Once more Yonah receives a call to go to Nineveh, only this time he silently complies. Interestingly, the message appears to be the same one that he already received. Apparently, now he can fully receive it and properly process it.

3:1 And the word of HaShem came unto Jonah the second time, saying: 'Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it...

1:1 Now the word of HaShem came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying: 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim against it... (JPS translation)

The impression that we are beginning again at the beginning is strengthened by the structural parallels between the first two chapters and the last two chapters. Both start with an almost identical command. Both tell of gentiles who readily accede to G-d's word. In both Yonah resists; although in the latter chapters he no longer runs away, he still carries out his mission sullenly and imperfectly. The first time around he turns to G-d after three days in the belly of the fish; on the second run, he contemplates His ways for forty days in a booth. There are many almost identical expressions and idioms that recur and impress themselves upon our attention and do not permit the central point of similarity to be overlooked.

The real meaning of the parallelism is, I think, found in the metaphor of a spiral that we invoked in the last lesson. Yonah now finds himself a turn of the spiral that is definitely higher but still spatially at the same plane. He has a second chance to replay his game and to retrace his steps. He has grown and correspondingly the playing field is much more expansive this time around. No longer on a small boat with a crew of perhaps a dozen, he now speaks to the entire city of Nineveh which, as we are later told, consists of 120000.00 souls. His spiritual stature had grown and his influence and reach grow correspondingly. The prophet is much more aware of his deficiencies vis-à-vis Hashem's attribute of Mercy and he is ready to realize that "Salvation is from Hashem." This illustrates that G-d gives us chance after chance to deal with and correct our faults, our backsliding, our lack of imagination, perception and boldness. Yonah is given a second chance and that is how God

conducts his way with men. Unfortunately, he is not yet ready to voice his complaint directly to G-d and therefore remains in some measure in flight from Him. You might say that his mind is on board but his heart continues to resist.

How does one reach the heart? How does a person internalize and retain what he or she knows, so it becomes and remains an integral part of the soul?

The chapters that we now read are no longer so much concerned with flight and denial as with the nature of repentance and with how one completes it and gets oneself over the last hurdle. The men of Nineveh are the foil and canvass on which the reflections upon sincerity and self-delusion in repentance are contemplated and painted. The reader knows (and the Rabbis point out) that their repentance was far from complete or sincere for but a few years later we find Nachum describe Nineveh as a bloodthirsty and oppressive Mistress of the Nations (if you can, read Nachum 2:12-3:5). Facing them stands Yonah, struggling with that last step in the process of repentance, the last and the most difficult.

We never learn in this book whether he achieved success in this holy quest - but as we follow along with him, we can, perhaps, learn something about our own.

Text Copyright © 2004 by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin and [Torah.org](https://torah.org).