

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE [YONAH 3:2-4]

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

Even after reaching dry land, Yonah does not verbally acknowledge that he had received a Divine command; neither does he set off on his mission. Hashem speaks to Yonah again... but why was that necessary? Now that Yonah humbled himself in the belly of the fish, should he not simply fulfill the original command? Was it because the first command lapsed? Or was it because it had changed?

An examination and comparison of the first and second command reveal significant differences between them.

#1

Ch1, 2

Arise and go to Nineveh, the great city and cry against it for their evil has come unto me.

#2

Ch.3, 2

Arise and go to Nineveh, the great city and cry to it the call that I speak to you.

In the later version, there is no mention of the wickedness of the people of Nineveh; neither is the prophet told to go against the city but rather to speak unto it something that he already knows.

Granted, "evil" may not refer to the sins of the city but to the evil that G-d has planned to bring upon it (see Ibn Ezra), as some have argued on the basis of similar usages in Exodus 32,14 ('and G-d repented from the evil that He spoke against His people') or even in the book of Yonah itself (1,7 -'let us throw lots and we will know on whose account this evil has come upon us' and 3,10 'and G-d repented of evil that He spoke to do to them'). I tend to side with the interpreters, such as Malbim and Metsudos, who understood it as referring to the wickedness of the inhabitants of Nineveh. It seems to me that this interpretation is strongly supported by the implied parallel to the other great ancient city, one that is alluded to several times in the course of our story - the city of Sodom (see Genesis 20, 21-22). Both of them were great metropolises that deserved destruction; when we discuss what the actual sins of Nineveh may have been, we will return to this point.

What has changed? Where did their wickedness go? G-d no longer seems as antagonistic to this city as in the beginning; instead He asks the prophet to call it to repentance.

This question led some commentators, for example Abarbanel, to conclude that during delay caused by Yonah's escape, G-d changed His mind. For some reason He became more favorably

disposed to Nineveh, offering it another chance and no longer actively seeking its destruction. If so, this would be a fine example of Divine irony, for Yona's escape availed only to bring closer that which he sought to prevent. In this view the second version of the command is necessary because the first one is no longer operative.

One might suggest a different explanation. Perhaps, the original command included within it two different imperatives. It allowed for the possibility of repentance but its focus was on the stern message of coming annihilation. The same is true of the second prophecy. This is pointed out by Rashi to 3,4.

And Yonah began to come into the city one day's walk and he called out and he said: "Forty days more and Nineveh is overturned".

Rashi: Overturned means destroyed. He did not say "destroyed" because "overturned" has two meanings, one good and one evil. If they do not repent - destroyed. If they do repent it will be overturned for the men of Nineveh will turn over from evil ways to ways of goodness.

As we have previously discussed (see Malbim, Abarbanel to 1,2 and Responsa Radvaz 2, 842), Yonah did not fully perceive or completely understand the full depth and content of the original prophecy. Its full meaning escaped from him for he was committed to Justice over Compassion. His spiritual point of view and assumptions were such that only the message of destruction came through loud and clear. The pain, suffering, and his own near death led to a process of growth that awakened in the soul of the recalcitrant prophet a measure of empathy for hapless inhabitant of Nineveh. Only now was he able to hear fully, though not yet fully accept, the other side of Hashem's message.

The rest of the book of Yonah is about the growth of this realization and Yonah's struggle to reconcile it with his previous world-view, in short, his engagement with Divine Mercy as the underlying element of Divine Justice.

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