

WALKING THE NINEVEH BEAT [YONAH 3:3-4]

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

Yonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of G-d. And Nineveh was a great city to the Lord, a walk of three days. Yonah began to come into the city (alternative translation: waited to come into the city) walk of one day, and he cried: "Forty days more and Nineveh will be overturned" (3:3-4).

What shall we make of this description? The city appears to have been quite large, for one day's walk is approximately 40 kilometers (Pesachim 94b), giving us a diameter through the city of something like 120 kilometers. This contradicts archeological evidence that the walls of the city were 12 kilometers and its maximum width five kilometers. Of course, it is quite possible that its population has at that time grown beyond the walled city proper and that the true measurement of the city included surrounding suburbs and settlements. Likewise, the Scripture may be describing the length of time that it would take to cover all major thoroughfares.

It is hard to visualize the events described here. How did Yonah ensure that his message was widely heard and distributed, or did he? Why did he not go all around the city? Why was his message so brief? Did he stop and repeat his message many times along his path or, did he, as it appears, only call it out once?

The Ibn Ezra suggests that the circumference of the city is three days walk; thus, it would take one day to walk along its diameter from one end to another. Presumably, Yonah recited his message continuously as he traversed the city.

A different interpretation is offered by the Malbim. He suggests that Yonah spent one day getting deeply into the city for he wished to ensure that the waiting period of forty days applied equally to all neighborhoods and inhabitants of the city. It is only on the second day, as he reached its center, that he proclaimed his message. R. Bachya understands the verses as saying that Hashem has not revealed the message which Yonah was to proclaim until the prophet had reached the city's center. This made the delivery of the message much more effective and ensured that it quickly reached the ears of the King and his entourage. The Yalkut Shimoni solves the practical issues in yet another manner: "Yonah was proclaiming in the market and his voice carried forty days distance and every single house heard his voice. At that time the matter reached the palace of the King." A more productive question would be the following one. Why are these specific details of his mission described here and why are they presented in this particular fashion? There must be some meaning that is inherent in this particular choice of details; what is it?

It seems to me that the Scripture intimates that Yonah performed his mission with great reluctance. This is evident not only in his delaying until G-d commands it a second time but also from the fact that he barely enters the city, getting just one third of the distance into it, before he delivers his message. Only one day's walk into it, who shall hear him - peasants in the market? Passers-by rushing to their affairs? Should he not have gone directly to the king, to the seat of power? Does not G-d's word deserve that much marketing? Not only this, Yonah exits the city as soon as he drops off his message in it, or perhaps on it. Is it not a prophet's obligation to remain with the city that has been stood on its head with the news of its imminent destruction? Yonah should have stayed and led the frightened and bewildered inhabitants. He should have taught them, embraced them, comforted them. It was his duty to lead them out of demoralization and confusion that he himself caused, to motivate and inspire them and to turn them to full and complete repentance. More importantly, why did his heart not grieve and well up with pity for its unfortunate inhabitants. What leader so frightens his charges and then leaves the scene?

Compassion is the defining feature of prophets. The Midrash points out: "All the prophets acted through the Quality of Mercy, for Israel and for the nations, for Ishaya spoke of Moab

"Therefore my insides for Moab like a harp will cry(Ch.15). Ezekiel said: "Son of man, raise over Tyre a dirge(Ch.16). But the prophets of the nations of the world acted with cruelty. This one (Balam) arose to uproot an entire people for nothing.(Tanchuma, Balak 1)."

The verses select precisely the details that reinforce the impression that Yonah failed the people of Nineveh to whom he delivered a profound shock and who thus became his responsibility. The narrator wants us to see this behavior as lack of compassion, not just dereliction of duty or avoidance of responsibility, in order to eventually teach us a lesson about Divine compassion for us to emulate.

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