

THE KING AND I [YONAH 3:3-5]

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

And the people of Nineveh believed G-d; and they proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them. And the tidings reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes (3,5-6).

As we proceed through the next several verses, we encounter a host of questions and problems. The reason why these verses are so puzzling and difficult to understand is that they deal with perhaps the very crux of spiritual quest - how do we, human beings, change and through what steps can we become something greater and higher. This is the central question of the book of Yonah, presented in this chapter through the contrast between the apparently complete but maybe not entirely sincere repentance of the men of Nineveh, and a much more honest but gradual and halting inner growth within the prophet himself. The gravity and centrality of the subject demands a slow and deliberate development. I ask that the readers bear with me as we deconstruct the background and slowly approach the heart of the matter, over a series of lessons. A careful consideration and correlation with other related passages throughout the Bible and their Rabbinic interpretations will assist us in unraveling the layers of meaning in the succeeding passages.

As the first step, let us focus on the following question. What was the sin of Nineveh? It is noteworthy that it is never made explicit, not in G-d's command to Nineveh and not in Yonah's message to its inhabitants. It is surprising because it seems to break the pattern of other Biblical books. There is, of course, ample precedent for a sinful society that is destroyed by G-d; we need only to think of the Flood, the Tower of Babel, and the city of Sodom. There are many linguistic and situational parallels and allusions to these cases within the story of Nineveh; however, the sin of these three is clearly identified. That is not the case here. Why? One may speculate that this reticence is simply an expression of the moral sensitivity expressed in the following Talmudic statement, "One who is a sincere penitent, do not say to him, 'Remember your original behavior?' (B"M 58a). I suspect, however, that it goes beyond that. The focus in this book is on the repentance itself rather than the sin that led to it. Could this sin be of a nature that the reading audience might find it difficult to accept? Could the advanced nature of prophetic morality be the reason why it is not made explicit? Prophetic morality is not the same as common morality; what is abhorrent to one may be thought of as commonplace and natural by the other. What I mean is that giving this sin a name might have perplexed countless readers throughout the centuries, who simply were not able to relate to it as a sin or to understand what was wrong with it. At the same time, a reader with an open heart can find enough allusions and references to draw the correct inferences and to

understand where the problem lay.

Perhaps, the real sin of Nineveh was political; its avarice, greed and imperialism, its domination and oppression of others; a cold, calculating, amoral foreign policy in relating to other peoples. For thousands of years man believed that anything and everything was acceptable in international relations, for the state and its welfare stands above individual morality. People could accept that rebellion against G-d or inter-personal violence and injustice might damn a society and consign it to destruction. However, until very recently, only the prophetic voices maintained that the same is true in regard to how peoples and nations relate to one another, even among Gentile nations, nothing to do with Israel. To my knowledge, no classical thinker ever made an accusation as eloquent or as unselfconscious as the one expressed by Amos (2,1), "Thus says the L-rd, for three sins of Moab and for four I will not overlook, for their burning the bones of the King of Edom with caustic lye."

Whatever your grievances about your enemies may be, you simply do not desecrate their corpses and trample their dignity.

This understanding of Nineveh's sin is explicit in the words of prophet Nachum, who calls Nineveh, "the whore of nations, for they knew to seduce the heart of the rulers of (various) lands to join them. At the end they would overcome them and placed them under their own dominion (Rashi to 3,4)". This great city was the source from which sorcery, degeneracy and amorality, in the guise of culture and civilization, emanated to the entire world. "From the amount of whoring of whore, pleasant of charm, mistress of enchantment, who sells nations through her whoring and clans through her sorcery (3,4, my translation)." 'The meaning is that nations are seduced into gathering into it on the account of much wealth and commerce in it. (whole) families of nations become enchanted through its magic and activities to blind themselves and to become subservient to it (Malbim ibid).'

Woe to the bloody city! It is all full of lies and rapine; the prey departeth not... Because of the multitude of the harlotries of the well-favoured harlot, the mistress of witchcrafts, that selleth nations through her harlotries, and families through her witchcrafts. Behold, I am against thee, saith HaShem of hosts, and I will uncover thy skirts upon thy face, and I will shew the nations thy nakedness, and the kingdoms thy shame (Nachum 3,2-5).

See also Tsefania 2, 13-15 and Isaiah 37,22-29 in regard to Nineveh's egotism and arrogance.

It is in this light that we might understand why the King of Nineveh put on sack. It is he who re-directed the course of the spontaneous individual repentance into a form of national penance. There is not a more potent symbol of contrition and humbling than a King wearing sack (See Kings I 21,27 and Kings II 6,30 and 19,1). True, Nineveh was rotten through and through. Its citizens cheated, robbed and oppressed each other. It was, however, not the root of their problem but a symptom. Their internal dissolution mirrored their external lack of national purpose beyond pursuit of power, naked aggression and desire to dominate, rule and destroy. Their repentance could never even begin to engage the real sin of their political culture until the pride and symbol of the haughty Assyrian state,

the sovereign ruler, accepted responsibility and humbled himself. Does this sound familiar? In our own time and place, the issues of national morality have again been thrust to a prominent place in international politics. It is as it should be for the prophets of Israel taught us that nations and peoples are not exempt from measuring their actions on the universal moral scale, and if they don't, then G-d will.

Text Copyright © 2004 by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin and **Torah.org**.