

# MAN AND BEAST [YONAH 3:7-9]

*by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin*

*And he (the King) had the word cried through Nineveh: "By decree of the king and his nobles: Every man and beast - of flock or herd - shall not taste anything. They shall not graze, and shall not drink water. Let them be covered with sackcloth - man and beast, and call mightily to G-d (3:7- 9).*

This public penance that joined together man and animal is quite extraordinary for "if man sinned, animal how did it sin (Yoma 22b)?" We do not usually think of animals as sentient beings that can sin, do penance, or repent. What's more, animals' participation in the drama of sin, punishment and repentance recurs in Hashem's final response to Yonah,

"And HaShem said: 'Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow, which came up in a night, and perished in a night; and should not I have pity on Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand, and also much cattle (4,10- 11)?"

What is the significance of animals and humans sharing the stage.

The drawing together of man and beast before the divine decree of destruction is not without a parallel elsewhere in Scriptures. We find, for example, that "all flesh corrupted its way upon the earth (Genesis 6,12); accordingly, "I shall wipe the man who I created from the face of the earth, from man to beast to crawling animal to bird of heaven (ibid 6,7). Similarly, both man and beast were preserved in Noah's ark - "G-d remembered Noah and all the beast and all the cattle with him in the ark (ibid 8,1)." In a certain manner it reflects the fact that when natural disaster strikes a land, both man and animals share the same fate (Hosea 4,3); when a conqueror ravages a country, human and non-human inhabitants suffer (Yirmiah 27,6). The bellowing of animals is seen as a kind of prayer; hence, "the beast of the field cries out to you, watercress is dried out (Yoel 1,20). It is, perhaps in that light that one may interpret the covering of animals with sackcloth.

There was, of course, a degree of Assyrian cruelty in this maneuver, for the truth is that animals do not sin and it is not proper to cause them undeserved suffering. Instead of turning away from their abusive ways, the people of Nineveh intensified their oppression of others, in this case, their dependent cattle and beasts of burden. The Sages said: "The repentance of Ninevites was fraudulent. What did they do? They put calves on the inside and their mothers outside; foals on the

inside and their mothers outside. These ones bellowed from the inside and the others from outside. They said: If You do not have mercy upon us, we will not have mercy on them (J. Ta'anis 2,1)." Like little children, they threatened G-d with the prospect of hurting His other creatures if He dares not let them go.

A different perspective may be derived from the following verse and its Rabbinic interpretation. "Man and beast deliver, O L-rd (Psalms 36,7)." These are humans who are intelligent but make themselves be like an animal (Chullin 5b).

I had recently come across comments of Mordechai Beck, an artist who illustrated the book of Yonah (exhibition of "Maftir Yonah" was mounted at Yeshiva University in 1993/94). One should never dismiss the words of artists for, with their hearts, they can sometimes read and see better than us, regular folk. This individual has assiduously applied himself to understanding the book of Yonah and this is what he wrote:

"Apart from its size, Nineveh is characterized by its moral waywardness. Its half-animal, half-human inhabitants are both highly civilized yet simultaneously alienated from their psychic sources. They have, under the influence of Jonah, turned to God. But just as easily they could have turned to a stranger advocating some political ideology. These people lack a basic sense of direction, "knowing neither left from right" ... The parallels between the Jonah story and our contemporary dilemmas are so strong that during the three years I worked on this project I came to sense that, to a generation which is searching for both independence and meaning, the Book of Jonah is as relevant as was the Book of Job to the generation that passed, in reality or vicariously, through the traumas of the Holocaust. ... we, the viewers, have become Jonah. We can flee or we can stay. Emerging from the belly of the fish into the light of day, we are forced to realize that the land of Tarshish is reached - if ever - only through the gates of Nineveh."

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