

THE HEART OF DARKNESS [YONAH 3:8-10]

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

Who knows, G-d may turn and change His mind, and turn back from His wrath so that we do not perish (3,9).

The King had called his people: "Let each man turn away from his evil ways and from the injustice which is in his hand (3,8)." He now expresses a hope that this repentance may be accepted and save his people from assured destruction. This reading of the verse as expressing doubt and hope, is found in Radak and Ibn Ezra and it is supported by a very similar sentiment expressed by the sailors during the storm in Chapter 1, 6, "Perhaps G-d will give it thought and we will not perish". An almost identical verse is found in Yoel 2, 14 and there it is also supported by cantillation notation.

(The verse itself is quite ambiguous in the original Hebrew for it can also be read as: "He who knows will repent and G-d will change His mind and turn back from His wrath...". This statement is much more emphatic that forgiveness must always follow repentance. This understanding, shared by Targum, Rashi, Ibn Ezra and Mahari Kara is supported in the Yonah verse by its cantillation marks which place a separating stop, a kind of a comma, after "repent and not after "knows", so that it reads, "He who knows will repent, and G-d will change His mind..." rather than, "Who knows, G-d may repent and change His mind...".)

The apparent insecurity and lack of certainty that Hashem will accept sincere repentance is in remarkable contrast with the assurance expressed by many other Scriptural sources. Compare it, for example, with the assurance of complete acceptance of his repentance exhibited by David in Psalm 51.

The contradiction to one of the most accepted tenets of religion, that sincere repentance is always answered, is noted by Radak to Yoel 2,14, who writes: "Even though we said that it is one of the attributes of Blessed G- d that he repents of evil and this is beyond doubt, still, if the sins are great, He may not repent until minor punishment is meted out...".

The insecurity expressed by the sailors, the inhabitant of Nineveh and even in the book of Yoel may be a reflection of the distance and a gulf from G-d that they experienced. One who had given G-d nary a thought, suffers a profound sense of alienation and dislocation when suddenly thrust before his Presence. The sailors and the Ninevites were shaken out of their complacency and their acceptance of injustice and callousness as normal order of things; even the Israelites, in the midst of the plague of locusts, felt very far from G-d's grace and forgiveness. Without warning and

unprepared, they abruptly perceived themselves and their life as G-d sees them, not how they thought of themselves. Suddenly, they were no longer paragons of virtue and pinnacle of civilization; now they saw themselves as puny and woefully stained human beings standing in judgment before the Most High.

This abrupt reversal in self-perception is a part of the conversion experience well-attested in psychological literature since William James. The complete and total reversal plunges the self into utter darkness that can only be inverted by surrender of the hitherto most precious, basic and ingrained components of personality, a sacrifice of self in order to save oneself. In fear and trembling, man surrenders before overwhelming might of G-d and offers up parts of himself in shaky hope for salvation and survival. There is little security, love and sense of uplift in this kind of experience, although it may initially feel so. Surely it is better than nothing; yet, it is full of darkness and it is so, so tempting for darkness to come in.

Most Jewish thinkers, with a few notable exceptions, have seen repentance of this kind as suspect. On the deepest level, it demands a form of self-death, giving up- and denying a part of one's personality, past history and nature. It is often accompanied later by deep regret and a sense of loss, grief and depression or, in an attempt to deny that loss, by fanatical intolerance and hostility turned outwards as religious intolerance. Sometimes the penitent, unable to bear the loss, quickly rejoins his past life. At other times, he or she remains profoundly conflicted; in lieu of a life-affirming and uplifting religious experience, conversion-repentance leaves the individual to dwell in darkness and loss. Even if the change is stable, the real work of inner change only begins, not ends, at the point of conversion experience (See more on this in the beginning of *Orot Hateshuva* by R. A.I.Kook). One has to change one's way, not only one's actions.

As we will see, G-d willing, next week, the Rabbis were deeply suspicious of Nineveh's repentance. It seems to me that the book of Yonah deliberately sets up a contrast between Yonah and the Ninevites. Yonah certainly did not repent all at once. He resisted and kicked and screamed every step of the way. Yet, as he confronted one cherished belief and assumption after another, he changed inside in ways that were much more profound, meaningful and lasting than if he had undergone a sudden conversion. Yonah's long process of inner change is contrasted with the quick and unexpected change of heart of the sailors in Chapter 1 and the Ninevites in Chapter 3.

The King of Nineveh understood that repentance is more than a conversion experience. He asked his people to return the "injustice" in their hands and he also called them "to turn each man from his evil way". Interestingly and significantly, they complied only in regard to "And G-d saw their deeds that they turned away from their wicked ways..."; it does not appear that they "left the injustice in their hands" behind at all. The Rabbis debate the meaning of this omission. Next week we will take up the disagreement of the Babylonian and the Jerusalem Talmud in this regard and the two different understandings of repentance that underlie their positions.

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