

THE TWO TALMUDS [YONAH 3:5-10]

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

We have repeatedly referred to the fact that the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds disagree about whether the repentance of Nineveh was genuine or superficial and self-serving. It is time that we read the relevant passages together.

First, a few points of methodology. The Talmudic understanding of Scripture is rarely fully argued and fleshed out; instead, it is usually expressed as pithy comments upon specific verses and the full picture needs to be extracted from these comments. It is also crucial to keep in mind that Talmud reports pre-existent ancient tradition. In the course of time, divergent interpretations of these traditions may arise. As a result we may encounter very similar language and formulations which are crucially different by the virtue of what first may appear a small change of language or emphasis. As we will see, the verses themselves lend support to either interpretation, also a general feature of all Biblical writing. As with other rabbinic statements, great care and much thought is required to fully understand and interpret our Sages' words. Let us look at one such comment. I will focus on only one comment because of space limitation; however, a detailed comparison of two others can be found in A. Rivlin's Hebrew book, "Yonah: Prophecy and Rebuke".

The Mishna in Ta'anis 16a seems to unequivocally affirm the genuineness of Nineveh's repentance for it holds it up as an example for others. It describes the procedure that was followed during public fasts for rains that did not come: "We take the Ark out to the thoroughfare ... The Elder among them speaks words that make humble. "Brothers, it says, not regarding the men of Nineveh that G-d saw their sackcloth and their fasting but that He saw their actions that they turned away from evil". The Babylonian Talmud adds a comment: "From the violence which in their hands - Samuel said, 'Even if they stole a beam and built it into a palace, they tore down the palace and returned it to its rightful owner'." In fact, Yalkut Shimoni says that the King tore down his entire palace for every brick in it was stolen from a different person. Samuel appears to have understood the expression "in their hands" as referring to their property, ergo real estate, a common idiomatic usage. In this the people of Nineveh went beyond what Jewish law would require for the Sages made a special enactment called 'for the benefit of penitents'. They realized that such a situation placed an inordinate burden on the person who wished to make restitution and will most likely keep him or her away from full repentance. They accordingly disallowed tearing down a structure and required monetary compensation instead (Gittin 55a).

This is not found at all in the Jerusalem Talmud. Instead we find the following, " R. Yochanan (a

generation before Samuel) said: What was in the palm of their hand they returned but what was packed away in a chest, closet and safe, they did not return." Here the expression "in their hands" is understood very literally, to refer to what they currently held in their hands and nothing else.

When we first think about these two divergent approaches, the former seems most reasonable. After all, Nineveh was not destroyed and that must mean that their repentance was true. However, the author of Yonah deliberately scattered discordant notes throughout the narrative, waiting for the astute readers, such as yourselves to find and consider them. What are these discordant notes? Among them we must count the remarkable fact that of the 6 verses that describe the repentance of Nineveh (3, 5- 10), three are a report of the king's command. He told them: "And each man shall turn back from his evil ways and the violence which is in their hands". Yet, we are not told that this was actually carried out and there is not mention of repentance or inner change. Yes they believed but what were the results? They called to G-d, they fasted, they put on sackcloth, yes, out of fear but were they sorry? It seems like they were not.

The king asks that they turn back from "evil ways and from violence which is in their hands". That seems to have happened only half way, "G-d saw that they turned away from their evil ways", period. What about returning from violence? There is no mention of that.

Finally, as we had mentioned previously, there is not an echo of repentant Nineveh anywhere else in the Bible. On the contrary, what we learn in Yoel, Tsefania and Isaiah is that it was a bloodthirsty, rapacious, imperialistic and aggressive "harlot of the nations". Not consistent with a picture of total and sincere repentance, or it did not last for long.

The Jerusalem Talmud presents to us as well a more profound point. The treasure in their storage places that they refused to return perhaps indicates their past experiences, opinions and habits of thought. Men of Nineveh were quite willing to restrain themselves from that point onward. They gave back what was in their hands but not what was deep inside them. As we discussed last week, this kind of repentance sees as its goal negation and rejection of evil, not its recovery and transformation into good. The beam that was built into a structure is a symbol of the evil that lies buried deeply within. It must be torn out and returned to its original pure state. The best repentance necessitates the sometimes painful process of owning up to profound personal failings, dredging out and restructuring the inner self, in fact, one's true self, in humility and strong faith. Anything short of that is self delusion and it will not last. The unredeemed self will fight and protest, it will undermine the walls that may be erected around it, it will eventually reassert itself and demand return to the status quo. The result is either angry backsliding or complacent hypocrisy and self delusion. R. Yochanan, residing in Palestine in the fourth century C. E., at the time of great religious ferment and sectarian strife, undoubtedly was familiar with forms of repentance preached there by newly ascendant Gnostic movements of all kinds and they taught that evil was beyond redemption; rejection and unceasing affliction of the self and unremitting struggle with the body was the only path to salvation. To him this was fundamentally not Jewish and he saw the repentance of the

Ninevites as basically and essentially flawed - from fear and not from love, rejecting rather than redemptive, destined to failure and not success.

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