

THE PATH OF SIN [YONAH 3:5-10]

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

The repentance of Nineveh certainly was a tortured and complicated affair. The indications that it was partial, faulty and incomplete come from the general image of Nineveh in the Scripture, multiple textual clues already discussed and the sense that a distant and foreign nation could not access the profound and complex vision of repentance that Israelite prophets taught. At best, it would repent as nations do, by negating and isolating the past, rather than redeeming and transmuting it to build a magnificent new structure on pre-existent foundations. The Jerusalem Talmud's opinion is well founded and rests on strong textual and theological evidence. There is, however, one very important clue that paints a different picture and suggests that Nineveh's return in truth was of highest quality (the opinion of the Babylonian Talmud). This clue is the description of Nineveh's repentance as "turning away man from his evil path". To understand that we must consider what turning away from a path of evil generally means in the Tanach.

It is interesting that the Scripture seems to present two different ways to repent. At times repentance is described as consisting primarily of confession and regret. These two basic elements are overlaid with many others, such as praying, restitution, crying, shame, fast and sackcloth, but the essence of repentance remains simply these two elements. On other occasions, however, the penitent leaves behind his path and this represents the main element of repentance with other constituents seemingly secondary and less important. The classic medieval work on repentance, Shaarei Teshuva (1,13) of R. Yonah from Gerona (English translations are available as Gates of Repentance from Feldheim or Jason Aronson Publishers), explains that there are two different kinds of repentance. The passage is too lengthy to reproduce here and I will paraphrase and also omit Scriptural references.

R. Yonah points out that there are two kinds of repentance. Sometimes, a basically good and decent individual may be overcome by a sudden desire, in a situation of vulnerability and at a time that he or she is simply not prepared to contend with the unexpected attack of the evil impulse. The way back for this person is relatively uncomplicated. He or she must acknowledge the slip up, confess the sin and then direct all their being to inner, spiritual growth - to become a greater and higher kind of being, one who could no longer be caught unaware, one who will never again be tempted by the same impulse.

The way back is different for a person who had sunk in sin these many years, whose inner being and personality are intrinsically bound with the evil path. A person whose very inner culture is avarice,

envy, lack of compassion, and inner toughness does not have the luxury of acknowledgment and then confession. He must first completely and in one moment leave the path of sin. The rest must come later. If he does not do so, to what may it be compared? To a man who immerses in a bath of purifications while clasping a dead rodent. A dead animal of this kind renders anyone who touches it unclean. It does one no good to seek refuge in the waters of purifications while holding on tightly to a source of impurity. Instead, it must be tossed away first and only then can purification take effect. No question, a penitent such as this still has a great deal of work to do and a long road ahead. However, it must start with leaving the sinful way completely and irreversibly behind.

In this light, saying that the men of Nineveh "left each man his evil path" becomes highly significant. It indicates that its repentance was not only genuine but also highly sophisticated. Babylonian Talmud read this phrase and understood that the repentance of this wicked city was sincere and true and that it was done in the correct manner.

You may ask at this juncture - how can the views of Jerusalem Talmud and of the Babylonian Talmud both be correct? True, there is basis in the text for both views, but isn't it correct that only one can be historically factual and so the other must be a mistake or a misreading?

To the rescue comes the concept of multi-valence in Biblical literature. This approach to reading sacred text argues that our Western habit of reading literature that developed out of the encounter with classical works of antiquity and the modern literature is artificial in that it demands an imposition of a coherent story unto human reality that is anything but straightforward and coherent. From earliest grades we are taught to censure out dissonant details and inconvenient patterns, so that an easily understood and consistent narrative may result. It is like a reporter who in order to create a story with a single message selects only those details that fit with the central theme and rejects all the rest. Some of you may have had an experience of reading a newspaper account of an event or occurrence that you are personally familiar with and having to remind yourself that this is the same story.

Biblical writing is not like that. It tells a story that is rich and overwhelming in its complexity. Bible is not a caricature or a collection of pious platitudes but a Divinely inspired record of how man and G-d once interacted. It seeks not to be consistent but to be true and to be wise. It knows that a man can be pious, righteous and devote and at the same time be wicked, cruel and ungracious. It knows that a city may wholeheartedly embrace return but also be full of deceit and hypocrisy. Scripture tells us both sides of the story and by doing this teaches us about the complexity of spiritual life itself.

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