

CONCLUSION OF CHAPTER 3 AND INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTER 4 [YONAH 3:5-10, 4:1]

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

As we slowly advanced through the book of Jonah it must have become clear that it is organized according to certain well- defined literary and symbolic principles. It is this sophisticated construction that gives it remarkable power to evoke and inspire.

Underpinning the book are 5 elements: the story of G-d's call, the prophet's avoidance or incomplete response to it, the repentance of the Gentiles, the inner growth of Yonah, and finally his response to G-d's claim on him - ABCDE ABCDE -F. The book ends with a direct quotation from G-d Himself. The first five elements repeat twice, the correlation buttressed by phrasing and situational positioning, in case we miss the point. The first story is that of Yonah and the sailors; the second one is of Yonah and the city of Nineveh. Let's look at some of the elements.

Part 1. Yonah and the sailors

1. The injunction and its violation ...and word of G-d was to Yonah (1:1)
2. The repentance of the sailors ...perhaps G-d will give us thought and we will not perish (1:6)
3. Sailors repent ...and the men feared great fear of G-d (1:16)
4. Yonah's rebirth in the belly of the fish (2:1)
5. Yonah speaks to G-d (Ch. 2)

Part 2. Yonah and Nineveh

1. The injunction ...and word of G-d was second time to Yonah (3:1)
2. The repentance of Nineveh ...who knows perhaps G-d will change his mind... and we will not perish (3:9)
3. Nineveh repents ..and the men of Nineveh believed in G-d (3:5)
4. Yonah's re-formation in the booth (4:5)
5. Yonah speaks to G-d (4:1)

Underlying this sequence is portrayal of Yonah's inner journey upon the canvass of his ill fated trip to Tarshish, his sojourn in the belly of the fish, his foray into Nineveh and finally his forty day confinement in the booth. All this lateral movement underscores inner change as the recalcitrant prophet slowly grows to accept the concept that G-d has mercy upon his creatures, even upon the undeserving. The concept that inner change is slow and additive and that it occurs in response to

trials and tribulation of life, guided by the loving hand of the Teacher, is perhaps the central point of this work. The underlying conception is that of spiritual growth as a spiral on which one ascends and descends, facing the same issues but (hopefully) always on a higher level.

At the heart of Yonah's experience is his 40 day confinement in the booth. The number 40 is very significant, being used in the Bible as an indication of a period of preparation and elevation. Witness Moses spending 40 days on Mount Sinai or Elija and his 40 days in the desert. We will consider the significance of this number generally in Tanach in subsequent lectures; suffices to say that just as the 3 days in the belly of the fish signify conception and rebirth, the 40 days are to be seen as evoking the 40 days of formation of a fetus. (A recent book by N. A. Aurbach, *Tov Nhorach* published in Jerusalem, is completely devoted to the appearances and meaning of number 40 in Biblical and Rabbinic literature). In this manner we follow Yonah's evolution to the point where G-d can speak to him and he can hear and understand His words. With G-d's response the book finally closes.

We never find out whether Yonah allowed himself to be persuaded and what his response had been to G-d's answer to him. As all spiritual quests, his quest did not end when the book closes. The book did not want to suggest a final and conclusive ending. One never stops growing and the conclusion of the book of Yonah does not signify the end of the prophet's spiritual growth. The sky is literally and figuratively the limit and this is perhaps the final lesson of the book of Yonah.

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