

# YONAH'S PROBLEM [YONAH 4:1-5]

*by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin*

As we enter the fourth chapter, the direction of the story becomes clearer. Until now we encountered a number of characters, prominent among them the sailors, men of Nineveh and their king. Had this book been solely about repentance it should have ended at the conclusion of third chapter, with Nineveh's repentance. The fact that the story continues indicates that it is about something other than repentance alone.

What comes into focus in this chapter is Yonah himself. In fact, there are only three actors - the prophet, G-d, and the kikayon, the ricinus plant. It appears then that the key to the message of the book is to be sought among these three.

The book wastes no time getting to the point.

It became exceedingly bad for Yonah and he became angry (4,1).

The construction used here is unique; the closest parallel usually denotes "causing damage" (as in Samuel II, 20:6 or Psalms 106:32). Only in Nehemiah 2:10 do we find it signifying "displeased" (When Sanballat...heard it, it displeased them greatly that someone has come intending to improve the situation of Israelites). As we had discussed in the past, the Hebrew of Yonah shares certain features with late Biblical style and this expression probably means the same thing here that it means in Nehemiah.

What is it that displeased Yonah. The prophet's complaint is presented to us upfront in verse 2. This is no doubt intentional for, as several commentators point out, it could not have been spoken until the forty days allotted to Nineveh have expired. We are told in verse 5 that Yonah built for himself a booth in which he waited "to see what will happen in the city". Thus verse 5 chronologically precedes verse 2. The complaint comes here, because, it is important for us to experience and feel the power of Yonah's protest right now at this juncture.

He prayed to L-rd saying, Please O L-rd! Was not this my word when I was still in my own land? This is why I hastened to flee to Tarshish. For I knew that You are a compassionate and gracious G-d, slow to anger, abounding in goodness, repenting of evil. Now L-rd, please take my life, for I would rather die than live (2-4)".

This emotional outburst appears to have called forth a temporizing response, such as one would expect from a parent who is trying to deal with a child in the throes of a tantrum. In fact, this scene

presents G-d as a patient father with a child who is angry and acting up. As we will see soon, Yonah presented an excellent argument; however, this entire interaction is framed in a way that emphasizes Hashem's patience and kindness. G-d's response validates the reality of Yonah's emotion but does not really respond to it.

The L-rd replied, "Are you really angry"?

Now when seen objectively, compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in goodness, repenting of evil - that's pretty good. What is there in this description that provokes such frustration and disappointment that Yonah would rather die than live. What did he expect, a G-d that is opposite of these things? The complaint is almost irrational; in fact, we don't understand the prophet at all. G-d should have long ago lost all patience with this prophet. By any reasonable standard, a servant that repeatedly disobeys his Master deserves to be punished. Yonah is not just somebody - he is a prophet, he should know better. Why is he instead saved and protected and given chance after chance?

However, Yonah know wherefore of he spoke.

It is important to realize that the other side of forbearance and graciousness is delayed justice. Absolute justice demands immediate, fair, and just compensation for bad as well as for good. While in abstract "slow to justice and abounding in goodness" sounds good, it allows wickedness and injustice to flourish. A victim of evil men can see forbearance and graciousness as indifference and lack of compassion and as a deficiency that allowed his or her suffering. Such a victim pines for justice, not kindness. His or her pain is not assuaged with pious platitudes; he wants justice and deliverance now, right now, and not in the future. At the point of pain, little can justify Divine dawdling. The only thing that reconciles a victim is realization that he or she is not only a recipient of harm that comes from G-d's inaction but also of immeasurable, direct and personal kindness. Accepting G-d's tolerance requires a realization that it benefits every single individual to an infinitely greater extent than would strict application of blind justice.

He hath filled me with bitterness, He hath sated me with wormwood. He hath also broken my teeth with gravel stones, He hath made me to wallow in ashes. And my soul is removed far off from peace, I forgot prosperity. And I said: 'My strength is perished, and mine expectation from HaShem.' Remember mine affliction and mine anguish, the wormwood and the gall. My soul hath them still in remembrance, and is bowed down within me.

This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope. Surely HaShem'S mercies are not consumed, surely His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Thy faithfulness. 'The HaShem is my portion', saith my soul; 'Therefore will I hope in Him.' HaShem is good unto them that wait for Him, to the soul that seeketh Him (Lamentations 3, 15- 26)

R. Yehoshua Ben Levi said" "Why were they called Men of the Great Synod? Because they returned the crown to its previous state. Moses came and said," Great G-d, mighty and awesome

(Deuteronomy 10,17)". Jeremiah came and said, foreigners croak in his palace - where is his awesomeness? He did not say "Awesome" (Jeremiah 32,18 - Great and mighty is G-d, the L-rd of Hosts is His name"). Daniel came and said, foreigners enslave His children - where is his Strength (See Daniel 9,4)... They (men of the great synod) came and said, on the contrary, this is His strength - that He conquers His desire and gives a long time to the wicked... And the prophets - how could they do so and change the formula that Moses enacted? Because they knew that G-d was Truth, they did not speak falsely of Him (Yoma 69b).

As Nineveh ascended, it oppressed, robbed, killed, exiled and exterminated. Yonah did not believe that its repentance would last. This wicked city deserved immediate and unsparing justice - not a chance for repentance and reprieve so that it can continue doing as it had always done. He protested bitterly and vocally. He did not accept Divine Mercy, not until the incident with the plant demonstrated on his own body that kindness is better.

The problem with Mercy goes quite a bit deeper than we have discussed so far. It is Mercy that makes human choice and world as we know it possible. Imagine that every evil was immediately punished. Would anyone willingly do evil? It is precisely the delay in extracting justice that allows the impression that it possible to do evil and escape consequences. It is Mercy that is responsible for the problem of theodicy, the old and difficult question of how kind G-d can allow suffering. To sharpen the problem, it is Mercy itself that indirectly produces evil.

Seen in this light, Yonah's pathos and feeling become fitting and appropriate for a man of his spiritual distinction. He did not understand Mercy until, for a moment, G-d removed his protection and the heat of the sun beat upon Yonah's skin. Tanach does not offer intellectual answers to tragedies, suffering and pain; such answers are not convincing to those who are in the throes of suffering. Instead, at the conclusion of the book we realize that an answer can only come out of our own personal experience of Divine Mercy, perhaps flawed but as close to us as our own skin. "From my flesh I will see the L-rd ( Job 19,26)."

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