

NEVER GIVE UP [YONAH 4:2-4]

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed unto HaShem, and said: 'I pray Thee, O HaShem, was not this my saying, when I was yet in mine own country? Therefore I fled beforehand unto Tarshish; for I knew that Thou art a gracious G-d, and compassionate, long-suffering, and abundant in mercy, and repentest Thee of the evil. Therefore now, O HaShem, take, I beseech Thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live.' (4, 2-4)

This is the third time that Yonah enunciates a death wish. At the very beginning of our story he had gone to sleep as the storm raged around him (see Class 15: Eliahu and Yonah [Yonah 1:5]) . Then he advised the sailors to throw him overboard. Now he asks G-d to grant him death. Moshe also asked that G-d takes his life when it appeared that his mission ended in spectacular failure.

And Moshe said unto HaShem: 'Wherefore hast Thou dealt ill with Thy servant? and wherefore have I not found favour in Thy sight, that Thou layest the burden of all this people upon me? Have I conceived all this people? have I brought them forth, that Thou shouldest say unto me: Carry them in thy bosom, as a nursing-father carrieth the sucking child, unto the land which Thou didst swear unto their fathers? Whence should I have flesh to give unto all this people? for they trouble me with their weeping, saying: Give us flesh, that we may eat. I am not able to bear all this people myself alone, because it is too heavy for me. And if Thou deal thus with me, kill me, I pray Thee, out of hand, if I have found favour in Thy sight; and let me not look upon my wretchedness' (Numbers 11,11-15).

The parallels with Eliahu are even more remarkable. There we also find a flight into the desert, sitting down under a tree, and some of the same turns of phrase and even the same words that Yonah uses.

But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom-tree; and he requested for himself that he might die; and said: 'It is enough; now, O HaShem, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers.' And he lay down and slept under a broom-tree... (Kings I 19,4-5).

These parallels gain meaning when we realize that Yonah was not only a student of Eliahu and of his students but also that he literally contained his spirit. The following is a description of how Eliahu and Elisha revived a dead child.

And he said unto her: 'Give me thy son.' And he took him out of her bosom, and carried him up into the upper chamber, where he abode, and laid him upon his own bed. And he cried unto HaShem,

and said: 'O HaShem my G-d, hast Thou also brought evil upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by slaying her son?' And he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried unto HaShem, and said: 'O HaShem my G-d, I pray thee, let this child's soul come back into him.' And HaShem hearkened unto the voice of Eliahuh; and the soul of the child came back into him, and he revived. (Kings I 17, 19-22)

He went in therefore, and shut the door upon them twain, and prayed unto HaShem. And he went up, and lay upon the child, and put his mouth upon his mouth, and his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands; and he stretched himself upon him; and the flesh of the child waxed warm. When he returned, and walked in the house once to and fro; and went up, and stretched himself upon him; and the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes (Kings II 4, 33-35, a very similar event with Elisha)

These prophets breathed in of their own essence and life-force into the immobile and lifeless form of the boy who lay before them. In the case of Eliahu, this boy was Yonah.

Yonah was of the same measure as Eliahu; Elisha anointed him (Mishnas R. Eliezer, quoted in introduction to Artscroll Yonah). The son of the widow of Tsorfas (described in Kings I 17 above) was Yonah (Midrash Shocher Tov 26,7).

Was it surprising then that Yonah carried out his mission in the same way that Eliahu had done before him? He was zealous, unbending and uncompromising in his mission; Yonah was 'ben Amitai' which in Hebrew means the son of Truth. He maintained his commitment to Truth even against G-d's own truth. When principles confronted reality, there was but one solution - "Therefore now, O HaShem, take, I beseech Thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live".

Eliahu achieved the pinnacle of success, successfully leading grass-root revolt against idolatry of Baal and his servants, convincing even Ahab himself, and so he run in front of the king's chariot. In a blink, his success was reversed. Jezebel sought to kill the prophet and no one, not one of his ecstatic followers and enthusiastic converts stood up to defend him. Eliahu asked for death for he knew that he had failed and so have they failed him. G-d agreed and took him "while alive to Heaven" (Kings I Ch. 2).

Yonah thought that he failed but in truth he had succeeded. It remained for Hashem to demonstrate his success to him and so He had not granted Yonah his misguided wish. Moshe also thought that he had failed but he was on the very brink of success. He was lacking to be advised of this fact; so G-d told him: " now shalt thou see whether My word shall come to pass unto thee or not".

Yonah needed to be shown that Truth is not opposed to Mercy and that it sustains and gives life. The rest of the chapter is completion of the education of Yonah.

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