

IN THE BOOTH OF LOVING-KINDNESS [YONAH 4:5]

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

Then Yonah left the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth there and sat under it in the shade until he should see what would happen in the city (4, 5).

Although Yonah knows or at the very least strongly suspects that Nineveh will not be destroyed, he refuses to acquiesce or accept this outcome. Why should he? Had he not upheld his principles against all odds in the past; had he not attempted to oppose G-d's purpose before? He makes a booth and stubbornly waits, "what will happen in the city".

What is this mysterious booth? Do we not imagine that he would have made some kind of shelter; why is this detail supplied while so many others are not. More surprisingly, the booth seems to disappear in the very next verse - "The Lord G-d appointed a ricinus plant which grew above Yonah to provide shade over his head...". What happened to the booth that he built for the very same purpose?

Some commentators suggest that it must have withered in the hot sun over the forty days of waiting; however, this does not explain why the booth should have been mentioned at all and why we should even care about it.

We may begin to plumb the meaning of this enigmatic detail by employing structural analysis and then rereading the passage in the light of we discover through it.

As noted in previous lectures the book of Yonah is designed like two facing pages of text, with particulars of the second column mirroring the contents of the first. When seen in this way the booth in which Yonah sat corresponds to the belly of the fish. The three days inside the fish are the three days of conception while the forty days in the booth evoke the 40 days of the formation of a fetus. Together these periods of time represent stages of Yonah's maturation and inner growth towards acceptance of G-d's sovereignty and above all his Mercy. A booth symbolizes this openness to the Divine; as R. S. R. Hirsch pointed out in his famous explanation of the commandment of Tabernacles, a booth is walls against the outside world and its values but it is open on top to Heaven.

When the prophet exits the belly of the fish he is ready to open his mouth and sing G-d's praise, but he is not yet ready to hear G-d's speak to him. In fact, he speaks so much that he assures himself that no one will speak back in return. The first level of denial has been breached but deeper layers still remain unbroken. Yonah reluctantly complies with his mission but refuses to accept the Divine decree of forgiveness for the people of Nineveh and he exiles himself to the east of the city. The

east is where the unrepentant go - Adam, Cain, builders of the Tower of Babel, and Lot, the nephew of Abraham (Genesis 3:24, 4:16, 11:2, 13:11).

After Yonah complained to G-d that He is too merciful, the response was mysterious, "Are you exceedingly pained" (4,4). However, the Mesorah, the traditional guide to punctuation and parsing of verses, indicates that there is a line (Setuma) between Yonah's complaint and G-d's response. This signifies that verse 4 starts a new paragraph and is not the completion of the previous one. If so, it is rather an introduction to the subsequent verses than a response to the previous ones and should be translated as follows: " And G-d said: "Have you been sufficiently troubled?" G-d promises him trouble and trouble follows.

The rest is about Yonah's trouble. He sits and broods in his booth to the east of the city, in grim determination not to give in to the Almighty G- d. Never, never will he accept that the world is ruled by Mercy; he wants justice and complete destruction of the wicked. All this time, however, a realization grows and takes shape within him - he himself, as a limited and weak human being, subject to physical frailties and vagaries of nature, needs and relies on Divine mercies for his very existence and survival. The booth disappears from our view and overnight the final spurt of inner growth, as sudden and seemingly unexpected as the sprouting of the ricinus plant takes its place. All this time Hashem waits patiently. When time is right, He speaks to his prophet and this completes the education of Yonah.

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