

RUNNING AWAY [YONAH 1:2]

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

"The word of the L-rd came to Yonah. Arise and go to Nineveh, the great city, and cry out onto it. And Yonah arose to flee to Tarshish from before Hashem"

Before we can consider the meaning and significance of this flight, a basic quandary needs to be addressed. What is difficult to understand is that technically speaking, Yonah committed a capital offense; yet G-d relentlessly pursued him to bring him back. "A prophet who holds back his prophecy, one who disobeys a prophet and a prophet who transgresses his own words - his death is by the hand of Heaven (Sanhedrin 89a)". Kings I, 20 tells of a prophet who transgressed his own words and was almost immediately attacked and killed by a lion. Why then was Yonah not only spared but merited an educational odyssey without parallel in Sacred Writings?

True, Yonah appears to have received an incomplete command at this time, one that was only later fleshed out as "call onto it the call which I speak unto you (3,1)". One may surmise that he was technically not a "prophet who transgresses his own words" for his prophecy was not yet complete. This, however, raises other questions. Why and to what end was Yonah given an incomplete prophecy; is there any parallel to such a thing elsewhere in the Tanach?

One may suggest that we encounter this phenomenon of an incomplete, later to be filled in prophecy when the messenger is not yet prepared, is not yet ready to assimilate the entire message (See Yechezkel 3 and Numbers 22,20. See Genesis Rabba 39,9).

The reason for this is that prophecy is not a text-message automatically sent and received; it requires a prepared and attuned mind and soul as well as a process of interpretation by which it can be internalized (For more of how this functions see Guide for the Perplexed II, 36). The message may be heard but it also must be understood. It follows then that even a great individual may not be prepared to absorb a message that radically contradicts his own deeply seated assumptions and beliefs. He may hear only a part of the intended communication; the remainder may come in garbled or unclear. The result is an incomplete prophecy. If so, Yonah may have recognized that he did not receive and interpret G-d's message in its totality. Instead of examining himself so as to find and fix the imperfections responsible for faulty reception, he elected to escape, for he was not ready to ferret out and dispose of the beliefs that he so dearly held even if they interfered with communication from G-d.

How this relates to us is, I think, quite clear. "Leave the Jews alone, if they are not prophets, they are

sons of prophets (Pesachim 66b). "Every single day an echo comes from Choreb (Mount Sinai)" (Chapters of the Fathers 6,2)" - only we do not hear it, we close our ears to it (See Resisei Layla 16 and Mevo Shaarim I, 2-3). "Like Jonah, the neshama in this world attempts to flee G-d's Presence - it evades its obligations and commits transgressions. As the Zohar states: While in this world, man sins thinks that he had fled from his Master (Vilna Gaon's commentary)". G-d speaks to every Jew, every day, through His Torah and through events of every day - but we are not prepared, we are not willing to change ourselves, afraid to receive and to hear what is often a critical and uncomfortable truth. In fact, like Yonah, we often escape, we try to still that little, quiet voice. Sometimes we drown it in the pursuit of material pleasures, even sin so as to become less fitting vessels to contain it; at times, we seek to flee into entertainment so we may not be edified.

How long will Hashem chase after us so we may hear His voice? Life is short and our time is limited upon this earth. He does not tire but our strength and abilities are not without end. Many, many have gone without meriting to hear. Yonah did reverse himself at the end; he overturned his course, ditched that which interfered with his reception and did Hashem's bidding. In this lies one crucially important lesson of this Biblical book.

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