

IN THE DESERT [YONAH 4:5]

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

So Yonah sat forty days in his booth to the east and waited "to see what will be in the city". As it appears from the forthcoming narrative, the place in which he found himself was arid, dry and very, very hot. The east is associated with desert, desolation and barren bleakness; as we pointed out in last installment, it is the direction to which rebels against G-d betake themselves. Remember- the mountains of Judah were flanked on the west by lush and fertile coastland but on the east by Judean desert and the empty devastation of the Dead Sea. The image of desert in Tanach and especially in Psalms, often represents spiritual loneliness, wasteland and isolation.

The bleak surroundings mirror and reflect inner dryness and spiritual retreat that the prophet experiences at this point of his flight from G-d's redeeming kindness. The surroundings both reflect and serve as a metaphor for the inner state; we have already seen this device at work when Yonah, after embarking upon his original flight was seized on the ship destined for Tarshish in the midst of a storm. The "great storm" represented the prophet's inner turbulence; the desert represents his despair and the stopping up of inner spiritual wellsprings. Then as now, G-d intervenes to save and deliver his prophet in ways that he could not anticipate. Notice the parallelism.

And G-d cast a great wind upon the sea...And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Yonah...(1, 4; 2,1).

The Lord G-d appointed a ricinus plant...and G-d appointed a worm at dawn...which attacked the plant and it withered (4, 6-7).

Again, Hashem saves Yonah. Again, Yonah does not recognize Hshaem's kindness. Is it the dryness and aridity that surrounds him? Is it the desolation and emptiness within?

There was another prophet who, in parallel circumstances, conducted himself in a very similar fashion. We have again and again come back to the story of Elijah to draw therein insights into his pupil, Yonah. As previously pointed out, Yonah was the child of Tsorphanite woman who Elijah resurrected. Yonah was a product of his Master's Holy breath and without deviation he replayed his teacher's tragedy upon the cosmic canvass of Mercy and Judgment. However, what was tolerated in Elijah was not acceptable for Yonah. In this itself there is a great lesson. Are we as individuals destined to repeat the errors of the past or can we, with Hashem's guidance move beyond our own limitations and prejudices? It is so hard to grasp truth when our constitution, upbringing and habits of thought obscure it from our sight. An appeal to precedent is hardly instructive. The leaders of the

previous generations taught the truth, as it was right for that generation. We must follow the leaders of our own times in how they interpret the Torah in the circumstances of our own day - "you do not have but the Sage in your own day (Sifri Tavo 23, 6)". Yonah learned well what his Master taught but he did not draw necessary conclusions from his Master's life.

Kings 1,14 tells us how Elijah called drought upon the land, for sins of Achav and the people of Israel. G-d commanded him to hide within a stream and there ravens brought him bread and meat. When the stream dried up, G-d sent Elijah to a widow in town of Tsorpat whom He miraculously sustained. It is her child, Yonah ben Amitai, whom Elijah resurrected from the dead. At that drought, Elijah still dealt out kindness.

When the false prophets of Baal were miraculously subdued, the prophet "went to the desert from fear of Jezebel", who sent to have him killed. Near death, again, G-d miraculously sustains him with food and drink; however, the prophet cannot find any more tolerance within himself for the sins of his people. He walks forty days toward the sea but ends his quest at Mount Horeb, literally, the mountain of dryness. There he complains about the Jews, "I have been jealous for the Lord of Hosts for Children of Israel have abandoned Thine covenant. Thine altars they have destroyed and Thine prophets they have killed. I alone remained a prophet and they sought my soul to take it (Kings I 19, 14)". G-d does not respond for this is not what He wanted to hear. Is it surprising then that at this point, Elijah's prophetic career is essentially over? He wraps a few loose ends, appoints Elisha in his stead and is called up in fire to heaven.

The parallels between Yonah and Elijah are striking. Both are in the desert, both are unable to perceive that G-d is sustaining them with His kindness or to thank Him for it, and neither perceives that what the Holy One Blessed Be He really wants from them is an impassioned appeal for His Mercy.

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