

TO GIVE IS TO LOVE [YONAH 4:6]

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

And G-d appointed a ricinus plant, which grew up above Yonah to provide shade over his head and Yonah felt great joy about the plant (4,6).

Why did Yonah feel such a great joy about the plant?

Imagine the prophet as he sat in the desert outside Nineveh, alone, isolated and angry. Even G-d was not happy with him and He had told him so. There was no companionship, no hope and no expectation that things would ever be better. And then a plant rose above his head.

It is the experience of those who had been in solitary confinement that their greatest trial was not incarceration itself but loneliness and absence of living companionship. In this state of complete isolation, many a prisoner was saved from despair by an appearance of some living thing, even a mouse or a crawling insect. How much more so for Yonah, to whom the sprouting of the plant represented that Hashem still cared and was reaching out to him. It was this tentative sprouting of hope that was crushed when the plant suddenly withered and it plunged the prophet to the depth he may have never before even imagined, so that he desired death over life.

While this explanation makes Yonah's joy understandable, it does not explain how the plant and the prophet's reaction to it becomes the crux of G-d's lesson about His Mercy.

"You cared about the plant which you did not work for and did not grow... And should I not care about Nineveh, the great city, in which there are more than twelve myriad people who do not know their right hand from their left and much livestock? (4, 10-11)."

To understand this point and the meaning of this rebuke, we must focus for a moment on the nature of attachment and love. R. E. Dressler explains in *Michtav M'Eliahu* (Vol. 1, p. 35-37) that human nature is such that we love others when we invest in them something of ourselves. It is giving of ourselves or at the very least, a perception of ourselves being present in others that creates attachment, and ultimately love. This is why we love our children, our neighbors and our communities and this is why we find it so difficult to love a stranger. While he certainly does not mean to exhaust all there is to say about the nature of love in this short comment, this is inarguably an important component in how we grow to recognize and love others, as it says, "And you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (See a discussion in my *With All Your Heart: The Shema in Jewish Worship, Practice and Life*, Targum, 2002, pp. 68-70).

Yonah did not relate to people of Nineveh. They were after all evil-doers, a cruel enemy of the people of Israel, foreigners and outsiders. The lesson of the plant was precisely this - lack of empathy stems from alienation and from seeing the others as the 'other'. "You did not work for this plant and yet you loved it for you identified with it. It is only when we see others as ourselves that we can grow to love them as ourselves.

The Alshich comments that the first verse of the fourth chapter can be read as follows: "And Yonah was angered and that hurt him". He felt the inability to grieve for Nineveh's fate, a dryness and inner barrenness that made him unable to relate to and accept Hashem's Mercy for the wicked city and he was exceedingly troubled by it. Where was his generosity and graciousness; did not other prophets feel for and mourn destruction even of enemy nations? Did he lose all ability to care due to his suffering and pain? The sprouting of the plant reassured him that he could still feel, that his unending suffering and failings have not completely dried out the wellsprings of joy, love and enthusiasm, that he was not beyond redemption. When the plant dried up it was as if his joy was not sufficient or authentic or real enough to sustain it. The desert without and the emptiness within and the prophet preferred death rather than existence without love and feeling.

G-d's message to Yonah was simple and direct. "You loved the ricinus plant because your hopes were invested in it. You did not love Nineveh because you have given it nothing of yourself. You must give in order to love or have pity. Shall I not have mercy upon the great city of Nineveh which I have planted?"

The Glory of G-d shall be forever, G-d shall rejoice over what he had made (Psalms 104, 31).

And Yonah felt great joy over the ricinus plant...

One has to give in order to rejoice and see oneself in others in order to love.

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