

YONAH BREAKS HIS SILENCE [YONAH 4:8-9]

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

Yonah's communication with Hashem grows richer and more complex as the story unfolds. As a withdrawn child is taught to listen, then speak and then converse, Yonah's conversation with G-d starts with a command that he disregards, proceeds to prophet praising G-d but not speaking to Him, continues with a complaint that G-d answers without acknowledgment on the other end, and finally develops into a true conversation and exchange. To demonstrate progression, every one of these four instances of attempted communication repeats and adds on the language of the previous one. The device of restating and repetition focuses us on the stepwise development of the conversation.

In 4, 1 Yonah's prayer to G-d is described with the same words as in Chapter 2.

This was a great evil to Yonah and he prayed to the Lord...(4,2)

And Yonah prayed to the Lord from the belly of the fish (2,2)

G-d responded to Yonah but Yonah did not answer.

The Lord replied , "Are you deeply troubled?" (4,4)

This is exactly where the conversation picks up again next time.

And G-d said to Yonah, "Are you deeply troubled about the plant?" (4,9)

This time, however, Yonah answers, "Yes, so much that until death" (4,10)

Finally Yonah is willing to open himself to the possibility of hearing, to the probability of rebuke. No longer does he dismiss his opponent with silence; by responding he has now engaged in a conversation and committed himself to listen to what his interlocutor may say next. He has opened himself to the unexpected and there is no greater sign of growth than that. Finally G-d can get through to Yonah and He does not miss the opportunity.

What is amazing about the entire process of Hashem bringing Yonah to the stage where he is ready to hear, is His patience and persistence. He pursues the prophet and sends after him a messenger after messenger, hoping and waiting for a response.

And G-d cast a great wind... The Lord appointed a great fish The Lord G-d appointed a ricin plant... G-d appointed a worm... God appointed the east wind...

Finally Yonah answers and when he answers the curtain is ready to fall and the story of Yonah will soon be completed. Although we are not prophets, we can also hear G-d's call, "today if to his voice you hearken" (Psalms 95,7). Perhaps events of our lives are not quite as dramatic and miraculous as those described in this book and we, of course, never merit a direct revelation; however, would we have been able to make use of it, if it came? It took Yonah, an experienced prophet and an exceptional servant of God, a really long time and several near-death experiences before his mind and heart was open. Can we honestly say that we would do any better? Is it any wonder that prophecy has ceased?

However, though we are not prophets we are still "sons of prophets" (Pesachim 66a). To us also G-d speaks in the language of every day trials and tests. He repeatedly delivers messages that He thinks we are capable of perceiving. Ours is to open our hearts and ears, listen for the message and then respond - to a kindness with appreciation, gratitude and intensification of prayer and Divine Service and to, G-d forbid, a misfortune, with repentance and sincere soul searching.

Funny thing about conversations - they require a great deal of work and preparation before they can even begin.

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