

JUSTIFYING THE WAYS OF G-D [YONAH 4:10-11]

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

And HaShem said: 'Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow, which came up in a night, and perished in a night;

and should not I have pity on Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand, and also much cattle (4:10-11)?'

Finally the Lord has the opening to speak to Yonah and make His case. He reminds the prophet about how he felt about this short-lived plant and He relates it to Divine Providence over Nineveh. You would expect that G-d can offer an airtight and convincing argument, however, that does not appear to be the case. In fact the argument is intentionally muddled and obscure and the second part is a non-sequitor. This is not so uncommon in Scripture in general and to understand it we will need to briefly discuss Biblical rhetoric and its use of parable.

Even a cursory reader of Hebrew Bible soon realizes that it is a work that speaks directly to the heart. G-d speaks in order to motivate and not solely to convince. Skillful use of narrative, poetic expression and grandeur of expression and sentiment characterize Biblical verse. That is not to say that it does not employ logic; however, the goal is to make an impression and not to argue a case. Its intent is not to lay out a logical or philosophic basis for religion. Its aim is to draw the reader into the inspired world of prophets, sages and mystics and to make this world his or her world as well.

Hashem's argument is at first glance a logical one, what is called in Hebrew 'kal v'chomer' and in Latin, 'a fortiori'. The essence of this type of proof is the demonstration that if a feature or characteristic applies to a less strict case, it should certainly apply also to a stricter case and vice versa. Genesis Rabbah 92,7 lists ten examples of this argument in Tanach, four in Pentateuch and six in the rest of Scripture. The 13 principles of interpretation of R. Ishmael (Introduction to Toras Kohanim) illustrate this first of his principles with the example of Miriam. "And G-d said to Moses: "and if her father spits in front of her, will she not be in shame seven days"; A fortiori for Divine. "She shall be isolated for seven days and thereafter be gathered in (Numbers 12,14)". The argument is that if Miriam was rebuked by her father, she would place herself outside the fold for seven days; surely at least that much should be done after a Divine rebuke - a true Kal V'chomer. What is strange about this Midrashic passage is that there are many more apparent 'a fortiori' arguments in Scripture (Collected Writings of R. Matasiah Strashun). Our passage in Yonah is one such example that is not listed in Genesis Rabbah.

I suggest that our passage, as well as many of the other ones not listed in Genesis Rabbah, take the form of a logical argument but are in essence a parable, not logical proof. A parable presents an analogy to a teaching that is difficult to understand. By introducing elements that are not present in the original case, it seeks to point out aspects that were otherwise not visible or intelligible. In other words, it forces the audience to transfer elements of meaning from the parable into the original. A parable that is a very close analogy contributes very little to this goal; a parable that is too dissimilar, on the other hand, loses credibility and does not accomplish it either. Thus, a parable must set up tension between apparent meaning and the one that it proposes; it also must enroll the audience into the process of reconciling the parable to its moral and create tension that will stimulate interpretative solutions.

G-d's argument to Yonah is a parable. Yonah's case and Nineveh do not match perfectly for Yonah loved the plant for the benefit that it afforded him while G-d spared Nineveh because they 'did not know their right hand from their left', or because they were so numerous. Yonah could have certainly pointed out dissimilarity between the two cases; however, Hashem wanted to make Yonah think, reconcile, and justify His ways, not bow under the weight of His superior logic. G-d wanted Yonah to take, even if only for the moment, His position and think about the world from His perspective in an attempt to understand His reasoning. Yonah's apparent ability to identify with G-d and finally change his viewpoint demonstrates how much he had grown over the course of the story and it serves as an example and hope for us.

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