

ARE WE ALL THE SAME? [YONAH 4: END]

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

Then the L-rd said: You cared about the plant which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. And should I not care about Nineveh, the great city, in which there are more than twelve times ten thousand people who know not their right hand from their left, and many beasts (4,11).

These last words close the book. What then is significance of these words and what lesson do they have for us?

Hashem's response to Yonah communicates great and tender mercy. Suddenly, Yonah recognizes it and is rendered speechless. Yonah does not respond for the revelation of the extent to which G-d cares about His creatures contains within it the solution of his existential dilemma and, more importantly, the key to his soul.

The success of the evildoers gave Yonah no rest. Nineveh, the whore of nations, the oppressor of the entire world, the epitome of human degradation and man's inhumanity to man - how could its prosperity possibly be justified, how could G-d's partiality be defended? Wicked Assyria lorded over and dominated Israel, Hashem's own inheritance, but He refused to intervene; more, He sustained and gave Nineveh chance after chance. Is there no justice before the Most High; does not the Judge of the entire earth deal impartially? Yonah was so convinced that Nineveh was getting a free ride that he refused to listen for, he was a man of utmost integrity and would not accept what he was sure could be nothing more than excuses. "It simply and entirely unfair; the evil are not judged by the same standards as the good". G-d pursued Israel incessantly at the same time that he showed favoritism to Nineveh. Why are the wicked not held to the same standard, not even to fraction of the same measure, as the righteous? When the answer came, it fell with the power of simple truth and Yonah fell speechless. Hashem said: "...people who know not their right hand from their left, and many beasts".

Who are these people who do not know their right hand from left and who are the beasts?

Some commentators assumed that the first clause refers exclusively to minor children who know not what is right and what is wrong and who do not, therefore, deserve to die with the adults (Rashi, Rashbam to Num. 23.9, Ibn Ezra, Radak). Rashi suggests that "many bests" should be translated as "great (rather than 'many') animals" and that the second part of the phrase refers to adults.

Nineveh was populated by children and animal-men, who did not possess a monotheistic religion

and were simply unable to tell good from evil. In the century that just passed we have unfortunately encountered ideologies that call evil good and good evil and encourage great crimes in confusion of values. Whole countries were filled with men who were like beasts, sometimes in what they did, at all times in what they didn't know, didn't understand, did not care to understand. "The soul of the wicked is called animal soul, for it tends after physical desire, like that of an animal, as it says, "and many beasts" (Shaarei Teshuva 2, 19, see also Chullin 5b)". What kind of Justice applies to men who do not know? Medieval philosophers suggest that such people are not subject to individual providence; instead, they are governed under the rules that pertain to animal species, group justice, not individual justice (See Guide 3:17-18, 22-23; Ramban Commentary to Bereishis 18:19; Vayikra 26:11; Devarim 11:13; Iyov 36:7).

How should we view such primitive men? Does their success provoke in us a sense of jealousy and resentment? It naturally would if we think of them as being the same as we are. But this is not correct, for those who seek Good and those who do not are entirely not in the same class. "Do not lust after wicked persons, do not be jealous after evildoers...For the wicked shall be cut out but those who long for G-d, they shall inherit the earth (Psalms 37)". Very simply - we and they are different species, we live and function in different moral universes and, of course, we are subject to different rules. Can one say that the Chofetz Chaim and Hitler belonged to the same species, even if they overlapped in time and space? Just as a person takes no offense when a dog barks at him, so should he not pay heed at the onslaught of animal-men. One should, of course, pray to G-d for deliverance but not take personal offense at being treated differently.

Let us look a bit closer at Psalm 37. In it, evildoers are compared not even to animals but to plants.

" For like grass they will quickly be cut down and like herb of the field they will dry out. (But you) trust in G-d and do good, dwell in the land and perform faithfulness". Like Yonah's plant (and there may be an allusion there), the wicked may prosper for a while but they will eventually go down in defeat; however, their ups and downs should not bother us. The good men must do what is good and pay no heed to the wicked, their temporary dominion, and their petty wraths. There will always be evildoers upon this earth, they will sprout up and be gone, and others will take their place. They are the flora and fauna of human landscape; sometimes G-d allows them time and at other times he permits their deeds to extract their own consequences. In either case, He has reasons; the important point is that we are not in the same category and their success should not offend us.

Does this mean that the pious should not care what happens to the wicked? Clearly, the Bible teaches differently. Hashem has mercy on all His creatures and we should also try to draw all men near with love and kindness (when safe) and teach them His ways of compassion, mercy, morality and goodness. Human animals also have the potential to grow great and within them sits undeveloped the image of G-d. Yet, at the same time it is important to remember that the wicked are not like us in many important respects and we must not be tempted to draw after them. The righteous and the wicked inhabit the same physical world but in spiritual dimensions they are far

apart.

Certainly it is not easy to balance identification and caring with emotional distancing but such are the imperatives of religious life. The last sentences of the book of Yonah tell us how to relate to those "who do not know their right hand from their left" and even to "great beasts".

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