

CONCLUSION

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

The way in which the book of Yonah ends provokes discomfort. Is there another Biblical book that ends so abruptly, so ambiguously, so full of unanswered questions? Did Yonah finally accede to Hashem or did he persist in his rebellion? Where did he go at the end and what happened to him? Above all, what is the message of the book and what is it trying to teach us?

One of the shortest, Yonah is also one of the most mysterious and difficult to understand among Biblical books. Ostensibly a prophecy and sandwiched within the Twelve Prophets, it reads like a story. Seemingly about running away from G-d, it ends with Him finding Man and justifying Himself to him. It is the only Biblical tale that takes place entirely outside of the Land of Israel, with Gentiles playing all the supporting roles. It resists simple characterization and simplistic sermonizing.

Many great minds have attempted to explain this book and unravel its mysteries. Many approaches exist and scores of commentators have wrestled with the exegetical and theological issues within it and through it. We have also done our part. We have taken a place among seekers and now, close to year have engaged in serious study, with seriousness, sincerity and fervent desire to understand. We have learned a great deal and explored weighty issues; with all this, we have barely begun to penetrate the complexities and depth of its message. We have taken the low lying fruit, we have partaken and gained, and we are now ready to go forth, fortified and hopefully inspired. To echo the Hadran formula recited at the conclusion of study of complete book or tractate: "May we return to you, Book of Yonah, and may you come back to us. We shall not stop thinking about you, Book of Yonah and do not stop thinking of us - not in this world and not in the World to Come". May the insights we have gained remain with us and may they guide us safely along our journey within this world and in the paths of Torah and Wisdom, as we continue to learn and study Hashem's gift of the Torah.

As we prepare to begin the study of Ruth, the lessons of Yonah shall remain with us. While Yonah portrays a Jewish prophet who goes and struggles with the world outside Israel, the Book of Ruth is built around the figure of a Moabite maiden who enters and joins herself to the Jewish people, finds meaning and purpose within it, and becomes the progenitor of the Davidic line. Yonah deals with the relationship between G-d and Man; Ruth teaches us about the interactions between person and person. Its focus is relationship of an individual and society, woman and man, woman and woman, the role of idealism and faith within family, relatives and strangers, belonging and exclusion, and the role of kindness in cementing human relationships. Yonah speaks of faith, trust in G-d and personal

destiny that G-d imposes on man; Ruth tells about redemptive power of kindness and benevolence and how one person gives to another. Its canvass is national and family life and it explores relationship between children and parents, family members and strangers who join them, citizen and sojourner, master and servant, leader and common folk. It teaches us how to live one's faith among people who so sorely and so often try it and test it. It provides foundations to understanding the roots of the immensely attractive and yet so mysterious figure of David, the Messianic King of Israel. The ultimate hope is that it will show us the way to grasping the balance between individual, private life of spirit and its intense preoccupation with personal G-d, and living within a community of other men and sharing their hopes, aspirations, failings and pains.

"We shall return back to you, Book of Yonah and you shall come back to us. We will not forget you, book of Yonah and may you not let go of us. Neither in this world not in the World to Come".

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