

OF REBELS [YONAH 1:2-3]

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

The word of the L-rd came to Yonah...Arise and go to Nineveh, the great city, and cry out onto it...And Yonah arose to flee to Tarshish from before Hashem...

At this moment Yonah faced a decision. He could accede to G-d's order, as Eliahu, his teacher, had done before him. Of Eliahu it states: "Arise and go to Tsarphas...and he arose and went to Tsarphas (Kings I: 17, 9-10)". Or, he could have disregarded the whole thing, convince himself that he never heard anything, and stay exactly as he had been before. Yonah did neither; instead, he chose to flee from Hashem. In this lay his salvation for, though he responded perversely to his call, he did not disregard it. He remained engaged and awake to the message that burnt within him. Ultimately he would not be able to ignore it. "I thought, I will not mention Him, no more will I speak in His name - but His word was like a raging fire in my heart, imprisoned in my bones; I could not hold it, I was helpless" (Yirmiah 20:9).

Why and were was he running? "One must be surprised for how could a wise man one who recognizes G-d and how He acts, think to flee from Him? Man is in His hand and all is full of His Glory?" (Ibn Ezra ibid). "Said Yonah: where shall I escape? If to heaven there is His glory mentioned, 'His Glory is over Heavens (Psalms 113)', if on the earth, there is His glory mentioned, 'His Glory fills the earth (Ishaia 6,3)'. I will flee to a place (the ocean) where His glory is not mentioned (Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer 10)". "Yonah said: I will go outside of the Land of Israel where Divine Presence does not reveal itself (Mekhilta, beginning of Bo)". To understand it, we must invoke a classic Jewish teaching. Although G-d created the entire world and all of it is His handiwork, he fashioned it for a purpose. The fulfillment of this purpose depends on man joining the heaven and earth through his Divine Service. In turn, G-d reaches down to man with His presence so that he may sense it and be inspired in his task. Consequently, He will be especially found where man dwells, and especially where man serves Him. Yonah thought that seas and oceans and other unpopulated places that know not of His name are not suited for Divine Presence. Perhaps there he can somewhat still the storm raging within his mind and soul; perhaps there he may find respite from the overwhelming Presence. He was mistaken for "where will I go from your spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, there You are; if I lay down in Sheol, there You are. If I take the wings of morning, and dwell in the farthest sea; even there shall your hand lead me and your right hand grasp me (Psalms 139, 7-10)".

It is related that R. Moshe Teitelbaum was vehemently opposed to the new teachings of the nascent Chassidic movement. Someone once brought him a new book published by one of the Chassidic masters. It so angered R. Moshe that he threw it on the floor in a fit of violent reaction. This was a striking response for Jews honor their books, even when they disagree with them. When this was told to R. Chaim of Sanz, he said: " From his action I can tell that he will still join us and even become one of the great. Had he tepidly repudiated that work and commanded for it to be respectfully put away, there would have been no hope. There is no hope for the one who does not care but all the hope in the world for him who remains connected, albeit in denial and rebellion".

"It is not deliberate desecration but only indifference that the Sanctuary for Judaism need fear from its children. This seems to be the thought expressed by the dictum (regarding consecrated objects) ' if the misuse (of a consecrated object or a sacrifice) was unintentional, the object is profaned, whereas if the misuse was intentional the object does not become profane'. When the act of desecration was deliberate, the sacred object retains its inviolate sanctity, for the very fact that it was singled out for deliberate violation only proves that it was indeed holy. On the other hand, indifference, a thoughtless act of desecration committed because one has forgotten the sacred character of the object and what our conduct toward it should be - this would dig the grave for the holiness of the Sanctuary, because its throne, from which it is meant to direct and penetrate our lives, is founded solely upon the awareness of those who profess allegiance to it (R.S.R. Hirsch, Commentary to Leviticus 5)".

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