

TARSHISH [YONAH 1:3]

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

The location and identity of the city to which Yonah sought to escape is of utmost relevance to understanding the meaning and significance of his flight. Unfortunately, it has remained a mystery and a subject of intense speculation over the ages. This is so even though there is a great deal of evidence in the Tanach and contemporary sources that one could use to throw light upon this question - only it doesn't, at least not conclusively. Let us consider some traditional identifications of Tarshish and thus seek to approach the real interest of our inquiry - why Yonah elected to specifically escape to there. Here are the leading contenders:

1. Josephus ("Ant." 1. 6, § 1), apparently reading "Tarshush," identifies it with Tarsus in Cilicia, Asia Minor.
2. Others argue for the region and city of Tartessus, a Phoenician settlement in Southern Spain.
3. In the genealogical table of the Noachides, Tarshish is given as the second son of Javan and is followed by Kittim and Dodanim (Gen. 10. 4). Accordingly, Tarshish may refer to a settlement or colony of these Javanite tribes.
4. With Pul, Tubal, and Javan, it is mentioned as one of the remote places that have not heard of Hashem (Isa. 46:19, comp. 40:9; Ps. 42: 10; Ezek. 38).
5. Tarshish appears to have had a considerable trade in silver, iron, tin, and lead (Ezek. 27:12). It gave its name, besides, to a precious stone, which has been variously identified
6. The Targum of Jonathan often renders the word "Tarshish" in the prophetic books by "sea," which rendering is followed by Saadia. Moreover, the term "ships of Tarshish" is rendered as "sea-ships" (Isa. 2:16). Jerome, too, renders "Tarshish" by "sea" in many instances; and in his commentary on Isaiah he declares that he had been told by his Jewish teachers that the Hebrew word for "sea" was "tarshish." In Isa. 23:1 the Septuagint, and in Ezek. 27:12 both the Septuagint and the Vulgate, render "Tarshish" by "Carthage," apparently suggested by Jewish tradition. Indeed, the Targum of Jonathan renders "Tarshish" in I Kings 22:48 and Jer. 10:9 by "Afriki," that is, Carthage.
7. To my mind the deciding clue can be found in Kings I, 10:22 and 2 Chron. 9:21 - For the king had at sea a navy of Tarshish with the navy of Hiram; once every three years came the navy of Tarshish, bringing gold, and silver, ivory, and apes, and peacocks. This verse suggests that Tarshish was located somewhere off the coast of Africa, where ivory, peacocks and apes could be procured. That

this city was so distant should not be surprising for Herodotus reported that the Phoenicians had circumnavigated the African continent which feat took them three years.

The location in Africa is consistent with the three years the trip to Tarshish is said to take - For the king had ships that went to Tarshish with the servants of Hiram; once every three years came the ships of Tarshish, bringing gold, and silver, ivory, and apes, and peacocks.

Modern scholars, basing themselves on the fact that shipwrecks have been found almost exclusively in shallow waters, tended to doubt the ability of the ancients to traverse open sea. The mariners of old were seen as hugging the coast, mostly keeping in sight of land and the heroic tales of exploits in the midst of oceans were thought to be no more than idle boasts. Recent evidence, however, is disproving these claims and supporting the supposition that the ancients regularly made long voyages over the open sea without the benefit of astronomical tables or compasses (See <http://www.archaeology.org/0103/etc/wreck.html>).

That Tarshish was literally at the end of the known world would not be lost on the contemporary readers of Yonah; nor would they be likely to overlook the length of this trip and the low likelihood of catching the direct boat to Tarshish in the secondary port of Jaffa. As we had seen last week, Tarshish vessels generally sailed out of Tyre and not from Jaffa. Thus, attempting to go to Tarshish would be seen as, as we say now, "getting away as far as possible", to the very edge of the inhabited world.

The Rabbis commented on the implausibility of Yonah's success and the miracle therein as follows: "The ship in which Yona went out to sea was two days travel away from Jaffa, in order to test Yonah. What did the Holy One Blessed be He do? He sent a storm and returned it to Jaffa. Yonah saw this and he was filled with joy. He said: I see that my way is proper in front of Him. Yet, he did not know that G-d brought it about to make known that His Glory (also) is found at sea." These comments may at first glance appear gratuitous but consideration of the ancient realia, that is the actual circumstances of daily life, demonstrate how deeply they are rooted in the text. There is in them also a subtle irony for Yonah was, yes, running, but not away, rather into G-d's very hand. What's more, in some deep part of his soul, he also knew it.

This rabbinic saying, in addition to explaining difficult passages, contains important lessons. First, it points out to us that G-d is always in charge and that He uses the best intentions and most well layed out plans of men for His own purpose. "He turns wise men backwards and their plans he makes foolish (Isaiah 44,25)." In addition, it makes vivid an important psychological detail.

What the Sages tell us here is that a truly religious man remains inextricably connected to G-d, pines for Him, and relies in Him, even as he rebels against Him. So also Yonah, as he was running away from G-d, could not free himself from dependance on Him. He was filled with joy when he felt His hand's touch in the miraculous return of the ship to Jaffa. Yonah rejoiced for he did not really want to abandon or divorce his Master. "A thief, in the midst of breaking in, calls upon G-d (Ein Yakov to

Berachos 63a)". This true metaphysically (see Tanya L"A 14) as well as psychologically. It is a self delusion and a sham to think that one can escape from G-d for even in the very depths of denial, we remain connected and dependant in Him. Though Yonah fled from G-d, he kept on glancing backwards. In this there is a lesson for all of us for what it means is that our distancing from the spiritual is naught but a self deception for it is a part of us from which we can never escape. We are free to at any moment throw away the bounds of self-delusion and discover the Maker of all things who has been patiently waiting for us - "today, if you hearken to his voice" (Psalms 95:7)

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