

ASHER NADARTI ASHALEMA: ANALYSIS OF SEFER YONAH (I)

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

Dear Haverim,

A shorter essay of mine, dealing with the "13 Attributes of Compassion", has been published in a "High Holidays Reader" and is available online - there are some worthy essays in the collection and it is available online at www.tebah.org.

Shabbat Shalom and G'mar Tov

I

INTRODUCTION

The book of Yonah comprises the bulk of the Haftarah read at Minchah on Yom haKippurim (most communities add the last three verses of Mikhah as an "epilogue" to the Haftarah). In anticipation of Yom haRachamim, I would like to examine this Sefer with an eye to understanding both its own message as well as its relevance to Yom haKippurim.

The story is, itself, a simple one that is unquestionably complex. The simplicity lies in the very human responses on the part of the main characters (Yonah, the sailors, the people of Nineveh); the complexity grows as we hold these reactions up to the greater contextual framework of T'nakh and some theological tenets to which we hold fast.

For example - Yonah's flight from God is the well-known premise for his sea voyage. We can understand, in human terms, shirking responsibility (although why Yonah doesn't want to heed God's call is not at all clear from the text). The complexity begins when we recognize that a prophet is a man (or woman) of great spiritual, emotional and intellectual stature (see, inter alia, Moreh Nevukhim II: 32-34). How could someone like that even consider running away from God? Is there anywhere that is out of His reach?

Where shall I go from your spirit? Where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend up to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, Even there shall your hand lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. (T'hilim 139:7-10)

We also find it hard to understand Yonah's bitter reaction to the success of his mission - when the people of Nineveh repent and God annuls His decree, the prophet is embittered "until death".

We will return to the text and its difficulties - but, first, let's place Sefer Yonah in its proper context on Yom haKippurim.

II

THE HAFTARAH

On Shabbat and Festival mornings (along with Tish'a b'Av morning), as well as fast days at Minchah, a selection from the N'vi'im is read immediately after the conclusion of the Torah reading. Although the exact origin of this practice is unclear, the sources indicate that at some point during the times of the Second Temple, a decree was issued forbidding the Jews to engage in the public reading of the Torah. In response, parallel selections from the N'vi'im were selected and read in lieu of the "missed" Torah reading. Although a few of the selections are mentioned in the Talmuds, most of the occasions for reading from the N'vi'im allowed for enough flexibility that the specific selection was not codified until much later. (For the most part, the festival readings were fixed earlier - we will examine the entire development of the Haftarot next summer when we analyze the seven Haftarot of consolation). As to why certain Torah readings (e.g. Shabbat mornings) "merited" the "reading-in-lieu" from the N'vi'im - and others (e.g. Rosh Chodesh and Hanukkah morning) did not - is a discussion that belongs to a different shiur. In any case, even after the decree was rescinded, the custom remained in practice and, to the consternation of many a 12-year old, remains so until today.

In sum, we read a selection from the N'vi'im ("Haftarah") as a parallel to the Torah reading. The usual minimum of verse to be read - 21 - parallels the absolute minimum readable at a Shabbat morning reading (7 Aliyot times 3 verses - as to why we don't allow for a shorter reading on Festivals, when there are fewer Aliyot - is a matter to be discussed in another forum). Indeed, the reason that the person called up to read the Haftarah first reads from the Torah ("Maftir") is to show honor to the Torah, as it would be degrading to ignore the Torah and only read from the N'vi'im (BT Megillah 23a).

In the case of the festivals, as opposed to an association with the content of the Torah reading, the Haftarah usually has a direct association with the festival itself - either historic (e.g. the first day of Pesach) or meta-historic (e.g. the Haftarot of the last day of Pesach and Shabbat hol haMo'ed Sukkot).

The Gemara (BT Megillah 31a) reports that on Yom haKippurim in the morning, we read "Aharei Mot" (Vayyikra 16) and the Haftarah is from Yeshaya 57-58. Both of these readings "make sense" within the general context of Festival readings; Vayyikra 16 details the Avodah (worship) performed by the Kohen Gadol on Yom haKippurim in the Mishkan (later to be applied to the Beit haMikdash). The selection from Yeshaya contains the famous phrase detailing the "true" fast:

Is such the fast that I have chosen? A day for a man to afflict his soul? Is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and an acceptable day to Hashem? Is not this rather the fast that I have chosen? to loose the chains of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring the poor, who are cast out, to your house? When you see the naked, that you cover him; and that you hide not yourself from your own flesh?

It is abundantly clear why this reading "fits" Yom haKippurim - lest we get carried away with our own piety in our fasting and confessing, the Navi reminds us that the real purpose of fasting is to effect a spiritual metamorphosis within us, making us more sensitive to the poor and needy.

The Gemara goes on to detail the readings at Minchah on Yom haKippurim: At Minhah we read the section of Arayot (forbidden sexual liaisons) and for haftarah the book of Yonah. (Megillah ibid)

As much as the relevance of the morning readings is easy to understand, the aptness of these readings is difficult to decipher. Why do we read the list of forbidden relationships at Minchah on Yom haKippurim? Some of the Rishonim address this (see, e.g. Rashi and Tosafot ad loc.), noting that this is an auspicious time to commit to avoiding these heinous sins; yet, we must admit, these sort of transgressions are not usually on most people's minds after fasting most of the day.

The Haftarah of Yonah is even harder to figure. To begin with, the story itself is hard to properly explicate. In addition, we never hear the content of Yonah's call to the Ninevites to repent - only the fact of that call and their (surprising?) reaction. There are so many powerful passages in the N'vi'im that could inspire us to do Teshuvah at this sober moment - what is it about Yonah that earns it the honored Haftarah of Yom haKippurim afternoon?

Before addressing the text itself, I would like to propose a theory which, a priori, may sound radical - yet, I believe, is borne out by the sources.

As pointed out above, the Haftara is always attached to an occasion of K'riat haTorah - and usually comprises some parallel story to either the Torah reading or the "Inyanei d'Yoma" (matters related to the "day" - i.e. the festival). Whether parallel to the K'riah or the Yom, however, the Haftarah always is occasioned by the K'riah - in other words, the Haftarah only occurs as a result of the K'riah and as an ancillary reading to that occasion.

As pointed out above, the Torah reading in the afternoon seems to have little to do with Yom haKippurim (see, however, the explanation of the G'onim quoted in a number of Rishonim). Perhaps the most reasonable choice would have been the section of Yom haKippurim in Vayyikra 23, which was read by the Kohen Gadol (M. Yoma 7:1).

Gabba'im and Ba'alei K'riah know the simplest connection - the K'riah of Minchah comes almost immediately after the K'riah of Shacharit. Indeed, in many communities in the Middle Ages, the morning reading included Vayyikra 17 (cf. Shibbolei haLeket #320); i.e. the Minchah reading was

simply a continuation of the morning reading. (In other communities, they would only read the "middle section" of Vayyikra 17 when Yom haKippurim occurred on Shabbat, necessitating an additional Aliyah; see, inter alia, Or Zarua' II:393. See also the literature cited by J. Tabori: "Mo'adei Yisra'el biT'kufat haMishnah vahaTalmud", p. 292, n. 135)

In general, this afternoon K'riat haTorah is puzzling. If we are regarding this part of the day as a "Ta'anit" (as we do with the afternoon of Tish'ah b'Av), why don't we read the section from Sh'mot 33/34, which is read on every other fast day in the afternoon? This would be an appropriate K'riah, since those events culminated (according to tradition) on the very first Yom haKippurim, when the second tablets were carved by Mosheh. If, on the other hand, we continue to regard the day as "special", i.e. not within the general category of "Ta'anit", then why have a reading at all? We don't find a Torah reading in the afternoon (besides fast days) except on Shabbat - why do we read now?

I would like to suggest that Yonah is an exception to the rule; the motivating factor in the reading at Minchah on Yom haKippurim is the book of Yonah (as opposed to the Torah reading from Vayyikra 18). In other words, we cannot simply read from the N'vi'im without a K'riat haTorah (as cited above from the Gemara), due to honor for the Torah. Since the book of Yonah should be read, we first take out the Torah and "pick up" from the morning's reading, fulfilling the minimal reading of 3 Aliyot - which allows us to publicly read the story of Yonah.

Although we may have solved one problem, we now have to find a strong motivating factor for reading Yonah at Minchah - so strong, that we effect a K'riat haTorah just in order to read this story.

In order to find that factor, we must first (finally) analyze the story itself and address some of the difficulties within the text.

III

THE PROBLEMS

The first problem in assessing the story of Yonah is, as mentioned above, Yonah's reticence to accept God's task. Besides the preposterous attempt to "flee from God's face", why is Yonah so bothered by this mission?

A number of answers have been suggested over the years, answers which end up addressing the greater question of the message of this Sefer. We will assay them further on.

In addition to this "overview" question, Yonah's behavior both on the ship and in the belly of the fish are hard to understand.

When the ship is threatened - and Yonah knows that it is due to God's displeasure with him - Yonah goes to sleep in the hold while all of the sailors pray fervently "each man to his own god". Once in the belly of the fish, he is silent for three days. At that point, instead of praying to be saved, he offers

a psalm of thanksgiving to God for having saved him, confident that "yet I will look again toward Your holy temple."

There is one glaring problem in the Sefer. The response of the Ninevites to Yonah's call is twofold:

1. And the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. And word came to the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he took off his robe, and covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying: Neither man, beast, herd or flock should taste anything! They should not feed nor drink water... (3:5-7)
2. ...let them turn everyone from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands. Who can tell if God may yet turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, so that we perish not? And God saw their doings, that they turned from their evil way; (3:8-10)

In other words, the people of Nineveh both practiced the form of fasting (e.g. sackcloth, ashes) as well as repenting from the sinful behavior which got them into trouble in the first place. This second response, as noted in the verse, is the action which earns a reprieve from God's decree. (See M. Ta'anit 2:1 in which this point is pronounced by the elder at a public fast).

We would then expect God to "explain" His forgiving the Ninevites based on their behavior modification - yet the Sefer ends with an enigmatic phrase, in which God "defends" His compassion for the Ninevites:

And should I not spare Nineveh, that great city, where there are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?

Who are these people who "cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand" - i.e. do not know right from wrong? If this is a description of the populace of Nineveh, then how can their "Teshuvah" be of any value? The basic premise of Teshuvah is free will (see MT Teshuvah 7:1). Some have suggested that this is a reference to the children of Nineveh, but the use of Adam as a reference specifically to children has no support from any other passage in T'nakh. In addition, why are the cattle included here - they did not "repent" (nor did they sin!). This brings us back to the description of the behavior of the Ninevites: Why did they force the animals to wear sackcloth and fast?

SUMMARY

In sum, we have raised several major questions (there are countless other "detail" questions on this Sefer, some of which will be addressed in our analysis):

1. What is Yonah's dispute with God?

2. Why does he think that he can flee from God?
3. How can we understand his behavior on the ship?
4. How can we explain the content of his "prayer" in the belly of the fish?
5. Why do the Ninevites include their animals in the fast?
6. What causes God to forgive them - their behavior or His compassion?
7. Who are the people who "do not know their right hand from their left"?
8. From what "evil" is the Kikayon (castor oil) plant meant to save Yonah? (4:6)

IV

THE FIRST SOLUTION (A):

STRICT JUSTICE VS. COMPASSION

The questions asked here, along with the Yom-Kippur-connection problem, are not new - many solutions have been offered over the years. Many of the answers focus on Yonah's complaint (4:2) that God is compassionate, forbearing and long-suffering - violating, as it were, the notion of Divine Justice. Yonah is a man of strict justice who is offended by God's compassion.

Although the explicit verse cited above does much to recommend this approach, there are far too many questions left unanswered as a result. First of all, why would Yonah, a prophet of God, be opposed to God's compassion, which is (as far as we can tell) one of the defining features of His relationship with His creatures?

In addition, it does nothing to help us understand the significance of Yonah's behavior on the ship, his odd "prayer" inside the belly of the fish - or any of the other questions raised above.

In addition - and we must always keep this at the forefront of our discussion - if the dispute is "Din vs. Rahamim", why is this Sefer read on Yom haKippurim? If it is to show us that Divine compassion overrules Divine Justice, why not read from some of the consolations of Yeshaya, or even some of the passages in Yirmiyah which point to God's everlasting love for the B'nei Yisra'el in spite of their failings?

V

THE FIRST SOLUTION (B):

TESHUVAH VS. KAPPARAH

A variation on the first solution has recently been suggested by Professor Shnayer Leiman. Professor Leiman points out that nowhere in the Torah is there a mention of Teshuvah as a Mitzvah (with the possible exception of D'varim 30:11-14 - see Rashi and Ramban ad loc.); rather, the clear prescription

for a sinner is "Kapparah". Kapparah entails performing ritual acts - usually associated with bringing Korbanot - which will expiate the sinner and cleanse him of his spiritual blemish. Whereas the Torah lays out, in great detail, the process of Kapparah for any number of different transgressions, the internal process of Teshuvah is not addressed.

Conversely, the N'vi'im assiduously avoid mention of "Kapparah" and focus, almost exclusively, on the process we call "Teshuvah" - retrospection and introspection, regret, commitment for the future and actual change of behavior. These two approaches to sin (which are reflected even in medieval literature; compare Rambam's Hilkhos Teshuvah with those compiled by R. Eliezer Rokeach) are, prima facie, at odds. That is the dispute between Yonah, who takes the "Toraic perspective", and God, who adopts the Prophetic approach of preferring Teshuvah to Kapparah.

As interesting as this approach may be - and it has interesting implications for understanding subtle tensions within Rabbinic and post-Rabbinic literature - it still leaves us with the same difficulties mentioned above.

VI

THE SECOND SOLUTION:

UNIVERSALISM VS. NATIONALISM

A common approach to understanding Yonah's flight (which is clearly motivated by his fear of success) is that he was driven by his overwhelming concern for the B'nei Yisra'el. This approach itself is usually expressed in one of two variations:

He did not want to allow the Ninevites to save themselves, since they bore enmity towards the B'nei Yisra'el (and would eventually conquer the Northern Kingdom -Avrabanel), or

He was concerned that the Ninevites would heed his call - thus making the B'nei Yisra'el look bad both in the eyes of the world and in God's eyes, since they were not returning to God. (Rashi, Radak among others, based on the Midrash)

Note how smoothly S'forno integrates both answers: "He knew that Yisra'el would not submit themselves in the same fashion [as the Ninevites] and Yisra'el would, therefore, fall to the Assyrian kings. (S'forno on 4:1)

Essentially, the dispute between Yonah and God boils down to different understandings of the special relationship which exists between HaKadosh Barukh Hu and the B'nei Yisra'el. Is it fundamentally chauvinistic and parochial, where our concern for other nations is, at best, only when it could not possibly conflict with self-interest? Or do we internalize and actualize God's abiding love and concern for all of His creatures, even while giving precedence to the concern and welfare of our family - the B'nei Yisra'el? Should we help a nation "get better" spiritually, even if that will harm us?

Does it make a difference if that harm is caused as much by our own shortcomings as by the success of others?

This is a popular approach to understanding the dispute - but it makes the selection of Yonah for Haftarat Minchah on Yom haKippurim even more difficult to decipher. In addition, it leaves all of our questions unanswered.

In part 2, we will present another approach to understanding Sefer Yonah which will, hopefully, provide satisfactory answers to our questions along with giving us greater insight into Haza"l's selection of this Sefer for the Haftarah of Minchah on Yom haKippurim.

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