

The Failed Teshuva of Nineveh

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The Book of Yona, read as the haftara on the afternoon of Yom Kippur, is typically understood as a classic illustration of the power of teshuva.² After all, the inhabitants of the city of Nineveh were slated for destruction, but were able to alter their fate by doing teshuva. This message of the power of teshuva is (rightfully) deemed particularly appropriate in the waning hours of Yom Kippur.

The purpose of this essay is to present a different approach to the Book of Yona, one that sees a very different message in its pages.

Let us begin our analysis at the end of the Book. G-d tells Yona, after Nineveh had been spared, that His sparing the city was an act of divine mercy:

How shall I not show pity to the great city of Nineveh that has more than 120,000 people who don't know their right from their left and many animals?

Yona 4:11

וְאֲנִי לֹא אָחִים עַל נִינְוֵה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה אֲשֶׁר
לֹא יָדָע בֵּין יְמִינֹו לְשִׂמְאֵלוֹ וּבִהְמָה רֶבֶה.
יֹנָה ד:יא

Why was the sparing of the city an act of pity? Had not the people earned the reprieve, at least on some level, by virtue of their extraordinary teshuva?

Abarbanel and Malbim both suggest that the teshuva of the people of Nineveh was actually quite deficient. True, they modified their behavior—returning stolen objects and engaging in acts of contribution like fasting and the wearing of sackcloth—but they never embraced a belief in one G-d, which is so basic to teshuva. They began as idolaters, and they remained idolaters. Hence, the city was **not** spared because of their teshuvah, which was actually deficient, but only because of G-d's mercy.

¹ Dedicated by my wife Shira and myself in honor of the bar Mitzvah of our son Aharon Shmaya on Yom Kippur 5775. May we merit to raise him and his siblings -- Chava, Miriam, and Moshe -- as true *ohavei Hashem*.

² This is clearly the position of the author of the “*pizmon*” recited on Tzom Gedalia entitled “*Horeisa Derech Teshuva*,” which extols prominent examples of proper *teshuva* throughout history and concludes by describing the *teshuva* of Nineveh:

“The people of [Nineveh] the great city spoke with sharp tongues against You;/ their sins, both inadvertent and intentional, increased until the heavens/ When You revealed the vision of their overthrow, shuddering and quaking seized them;/ they repented properly – and were accepted before Your Throne of Glory.” (*The Complete ArtScroll Selichos*, page 499.)

On the surface, this answer of Abarbanel and Malbim seems extraordinarily difficult to reconcile with the verses themselves. The verse states explicitly that the people of Nineveh “believed . . . in G-d” (3:5) and “cried out to G-d” (3:8). In fact, Ibn Ezra (1:2) characterizes the people of Nineveh in a manner that is entirely the opposite of the approach suggested by Abarbanel and Malbim. He describes the Ninevites as having always been monotheistic; after all, there is no mention of their abandoning idolatry as part of their teshuva. They must have **never** worshipped idols, says Ibn Ezra.

I believe that Abarbanel’s and Malbim’s approach can be understood when we pay close attention to the shifting divine names that appear in the Book of Yona. Sometimes G-d is described as Hashem, sometimes Elokim, and once as Hashem Elokim. Appreciating the shift between these various names is a key to a deeper understanding of the story.

The Names of G-d

Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi (*Kuzari*, beginning of Book IV) outlines a fundamental difference in the implications between the name “Elokim” versus the name “Hashem.” “Elokim” he writes, is the generic term for G-d. Through philosophic speculations, an intelligent person can come to the belief in a Supreme Being. But this belief is merely a belief in an intellectual proposition. No personal relationship is forged between man and G-d when G-d is appreciated as “Elokim.”

By contrast, “Hashem” connotes G-d as experienced through revelation, whether the communal revelation at Sinai or the personal revelation of prophecy.³

[One who experiences G-d as “Hashem” will] scoff at the logical argument that he used in the past to apprehend G-d’s mastery and unity. He becomes a servant who craves the One he serves, and because of this love he is prepared to lay down his life.”

Kuzari IV: 15.9, Korobkin translation

וילעג להקשות ההם אשר היו רגילות
להגיע בהם אל האלהות והיחוד, ואז
ישוב האדם עובד, חושק בנעבדו,
ומוסר נפשו להריגה על אהבתו.
ספר הכוזרי, מאמר ד טו:ט

The believer in “Hashem” has a personal relationship with G-d, which inspires him to follow the path of piety.

With this fundamental distinction in mind, let us analyze the Book of Yona.

Yona’s Initial Success

As is befitting a prophet who has a personal connection with G-d, Yona experiences the command from G-d sending him to Nineveh as emanating from “Hashem” (1:1). But Yona runs away from “Hashem” (1:3). Why does he flee?

We are likely familiar with the explanation of Chazal that Yona was afraid of success, afraid that he would successfully convince the people of Nineveh to repent, and in doing so would cast

³ Of course, the most familiar explanation of the difference between “Elokim” and “Hashem” is implied by Chazal in *Midrash Bereishis Rabba* 12:15, namely, that “Elokim” represents the attribute of divine justice, while “Hashem” represents the attribute of divine mercy. R’ Yehuda HaLevi may understand that this midrashic interpretation is simply the natural extension of the idea he develops in the *Kuzari*: the more personal a relationship of any sort is, the more one can expect the parties to “bend the rules” and operate with mercy.

aspersions on the Jews, who failed to heed the words of the prophets (Cited in Rashi to 1:3). Rabbenu Bechaye (*Kad HaKemach*, “Kippurim”) suggests a different approach: Yona, like Moshe Rabbenu, humbly declined the task, thinking himself unworthy.

Perhaps the approach of Rabbenu Bechaye suggests a very different explanation than Chazal’s for Yona’s flight. Yona was concerned not that he would **succeed**, but that he would **fail**. He could not fathom how he would be able to convey to the non-Jewish residents of Nineveh that Hashem, the personal G-d of prophecy, had an interest in human behavior and was demanding that the people improve their ways. Even if the people Nineveh believed in “Elokim”—a Supreme Being—how could he expect that they would modify their behavior based on a prophetic revelation? Only one who has a personal relationship with “Hashem” could be expected to react in such a fashion.

Yet in Yona’s act of flight, he has an experience which causes him to rethink his position. He encounters the sailors on the boat. We can reasonably assume that the sailors were idolaters before encountering Yona. When in distress, they call out to their “gods” for assistance (1:5). Even when initially speaking to Yona, they beseech him to turn to “Elokim,” the impersonal Supreme Being, in the hopes of intervention (1:6). Apparently, Yona was extremely convincing. The sailors absorbed Yona’s conception of a personal G-d. From that point on, they refer to G-d exclusively as “Hashem,” praying to Him, recognizing that He will hold them accountable for the shedding of innocent blood (1:14), and ultimately offering sacrifices to Him (1:16). Chazal tell us that the sailors convert to Judaism (cited in Rashi to 1:16), an observation that closely fits the sailors’ embrace of the name “Hashem” in describing their newfound relationship with G-d.

The fact that Yona had succeeded in convincing one group of idolaters to embrace a belief in a personal G-d was not lost on him. In the course of the prayer he recites while in the fish—a prayer filled with expressions of a close relationship with and reliance on a personal G-d – Yona exclaims:

Those who guard false vanities abandon their kindness (2:9). | ב:ט מְשַׁמְרִים הַבְּלִי שְׂוֹא חַסְדָּם יַעֲזֹבוּ.

Chazal (*Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer* chapter 10, cited in Rashi and Mahari Kara) interpret this verse as a reference to the sailors abandoning their belief that their idols would bestow kindness upon them. Clearly, Yona is struck by his own ability to share his belief in “Hashem” with a broader audience. If he can convince the sailors, perhaps he can convince the people of Nineveh as well!

Thus by the time G-d calls to Yona once again to go to Nineveh, Yona does not flee. He now has a heightened sense of self-confidence, a greater feeling that his mission can succeed.

In a subtle way, this greater confidence is hinted at in the text. Initially, G-d told Yona to go to Nineveh and “call against her” (*kera aleha*) to repent (1:2). This time, Yona is told “call to her” (*kera eileha* 3:2), a phrase that subtly indicates a greater receptivity (Rabbenu Bechaye in *Kad HaKemach*).

A Failure in Nineveh

Yona arrives in Nineveh, an *ir gedola L’Elokim* (3:3). The phrase is typically translated as “an exceedingly great city.” In light of our focus on the names of G-d as a crucial key to

understanding the Book of Yona, we might suggest an alternative translation: Nineveh was a city that greatly embraced “Elokim”—a belief in G-d, but an impersonal G-d, a G-d who was acknowledged and respected but not loved.

When Yona warns the people of Nineveh that “in another forty days, Nineveh will be overturned,” (3:4) he makes no reference at all to G-d. The people believe in G-d—as “Elokim” (3:5). Indeed, until chapter four, any reference to G-d utilizes the name “Elokim.” The people of Nineveh embrace the idea of a Supreme Being, and even accept that He is angry and needs to be appeased. But that sense never translates into an ongoing personal relationship with G-d. After the crisis is averted, life in Nineveh returns to normal. The opportunity for the creation of a newfound connection to “Hashem”—one embraced by the sailors after they experience their own crisis—is missed.

It is in this sense, I believe, that Abarbanel and Malbim can describe the teshuva of the people of Nineveh as defective. While the residence of Nineveh changed their ways, the process of repentance did not serve as a catalyst for creating a personal connection with G-d. While they might not have been idolaters, they did not connect the social and interpersonal changes they had implemented with any type of religious awakening.

The Kikayon

The book of Yona concludes with the enigmatic story of the *kikayon*. It seems odd that a prophet of Yona’s stature should be so overjoyed at the growth of a plant and so despondent at its death. Moreover, in what sense is Yona’s sadness at the loss of the *kikayon* in any way comparable to G-d’s imagined chagrin at the destruction of the city of Nineveh?

Yona did not need the *kikayon* to relieve any physical discomfort; he already had a *sukka* (4:5).⁴ Rather, the growth of the *kikayon* satisfied Yona’s spiritual anguish. As we have seen, Yona was frustrated that the people of Nineveh failed to recognize a personal G-d on the basis of observing events around them.

The *kikayon* comes to reassure Yona. It springs up overnight, growing rapidly to enormous proportions. It is a miraculous phenomenon, but at the same time, a natural one. Yona is overjoyed with the *kikayon*’s appearance. It signifies that there is still hope that man can look at nature—like the *kikayon*—and be able to perceive the hand of G-d and form a relationship with Him.

Strikingly, the only time the two names of G-d appear in conjunction with one another—“Hashem Elokim”—in the entire Book of Yona is when the verse describes the appearance of the *kikayon* (4:6). The *kikayon* represents the nexus of “Elokim”—the Supreme Being, who creates laws of nature and allows the world to run “naturally” according to those laws – and “Hashem” – the personal G-d who, working through nature, allows events to unfold in such a

⁴ The classic commentators give alternative explanations as to why Yona needed a *kikayon* if he already had a *sukka*. See, for example, Mahari Kara, Radak and Ibn Ezra to 4:6.

way to benefit those who are close to Him.⁵ Surely, Yona reasons, the existence of the *kikayon*, and manifestations of Providence like it, shows that a man can progress from seeing G-d as “Elokim” to seeing Him as “Hashem.”

But then the euphoria ends. The narrative switches back to “Elokim.” The *kikayon* dies, felled by nature in the form of the worm. Yona despairs. How can the world connect to “Hashem” when even seemingly miraculous phenomena are crushed by the forces of an impersonal nature?

Seeing Yona’s despair, “Hashem” speaks with him and imparts a lesson on to the prophet: “You had pity on the *kikayon* (4:10).” You saw in the *kikayon* a vehicle for enabling man to connect beyond the forces of nature to a personal G-d.

“Shall I not have pity on the great city of Nineveh (4:11)?” The ultimate vehicle for enabling man to connect to a personal G-d is other men. Man may be imperfect, petty and foolish—“(those) who do not know their right from their left (4:11)” —but in showing mercy to the unsophisticated person who cannot connect to a personal G-d, one is able to connect himself to G-d in a profound way. The very display of undeserved mercy is the deepest way to spread the idea of a relationship with G-d.

With this sublime lesson imparted to Yona, the Book draws to a close.

⁵ The association of “Elokim” – the impersonal G-d – with the unchanging laws of nature is developed by R’ Shneur Zalman of Liadi (the “Ba’al HaTanya”) in *Sha’ar HaYichud V’HaEmuna*, chapters 4-6. He points out that the *gematria* of “Elokim” (86) is equal to “*hateva*” (nature).