One central issue in the interpretation of Sefer Yonah is assessing the thoroughness of the people of Nineveh’s repentance. A simple reading of Chapter 3 leads the reader to conclude that God was very pleased with their repentance, as the chapter closes:

וַיַּרְא הָאֱלֹקִים אֶת מַעֲשֵֹיהֶם כִּי שָׁבוּ מִדַּרְכָּם הָרָעָה וַיִּנָּחֶם הָאֱלֹקִים עַל הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר לַעֲשֹוֹת לָהֶם וְלֹא עָשָֹה.

God saw what they did, how they were turning back from their evil ways. And God renounced the punishment He had planned to bring upon them, and did not carry it out” (3:10).1

But Sefer Yonah continues for one more chapter in which God and Yonah argue about whether He should have spared Nineveh. The last word goes to God, and He appears to justify His decision to forgive as an act of compassion rather than something which Nineveh rightfully earned through repentance:

שֶׁוָּאֲנִי לֹא אָחוּס עַל נִינְוֵה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה אֲשֶׁר יֶבָּה הַרְבֵּה מִשְׁתֵּים עֶשְֹרֵה רִבּוֹ אָדָם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יָדַע בֵּין יְמִינוֹ לִשְֹמֹאלוֹ וּבְהֵמָה רַבָּה.

Should not I care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well!

This conclusion leaves the reader wondering, did Nineveh merit forgiveness due to thorough, sincere repentance, or did God spare them through His infinite mercy while deeming their repentance to be insincere or incomplete?

The Favorable View of Nineveh’s Repentance

As one reads through chapter 3, one struggles to find any major flaws in Nineveh’s attempts to earn God’s forgiveness. Upon hearing about their imminent destruction, they “believed God” and “proclaimed a fast” (3:5). This grassroots response was complemented by the king lending his support by donning sackcloth and ashes (3:6), decreeing a fast (3:7) and imploring his people to change their sinful behavior (3:8). This last aspect is particularly important, since it seemingly belies the suggestion that the people of Nineveh engaged in perfunctory rituals without improving their behavior. Indeed, the Mishnah holds up Nineveh as the model of a successful fast that inspires people to change their ways:

What is the order of service on a fast? They carry the ark out to the open area of the town, and they place burnt ashes on the ark, and on the head of the Nasi, and on the head of the chief justice, and everyone else puts ashes on their heads. The elder among them says words of admonition before them: “Our brothers, it is not said about the people of Nineveh: ‘And God saw their sack cloth and their fast,’ but rather: ‘God saw what they did, how they were turning back from their evil ways.’”

Ta’anit 2:1

Ibn Ezra shares this favorable view of Nineveh’s repentance and describes it as complete and unparalleled (HttpGet) in his commentary. Moreover, in light of the verse’s assertion that the people of Nineveh “believed God,” Ibn Ezra concludes that they were God-fearing monotheists who had only recently begun to sin. Ibn Ezra observes that the king’s orders focused on interpersonal sins (אִישׁ מִדַּרְכּוֹ הָרָעָה וְיָשֻׁבוּ וּמִן הֶחָמָס אֲשֶׁר בְּכַפֵּיהֶם “), He thus suggests that the king did not order people to rid themselves of idols, because they were monotheists and hence did not possess any idols. Given their past history as monotheists, God calculated that a prophet could likely succeed at convincing them to repent. Ibn Ezra

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thus paints a picture of a city that had only recently begun to sin — and even then, only in the area of interpersonal behavior — and swiftly repented from that negative behavior.

The Unfavorable View of Nineveh’s Repentance

Not all commentators share Ibn Ezra’s unreservedly favorable view of Nineveh’s repentance. In the Jerusalem Talmud (Ta’anit 2:1), R. Shimon b. Lakish refers to Nineveh’s repentance as an act of deceit (משמעת של רמיות). Some of the flaws that this Talmudic passage raise appear to have a very weak basis in the Biblical text, such as the claims that thieves in Nineveh did not return stolen items that they had already stored away. One of the proposed flaws in their repentance, however, is quite intriguing. It also appears in the parallel passage in the Babylonian Talmud:

מא הוו עבדי? אסרא הבהמות לחוד ואת והולדות לחוד, אמרו לפניו: רבונו של עולם.

This claim speaks to a fundamental question about their fast: Were they fasting as a means to inspire repentance, or were they fasting out of a belief that the ritual of fasting could somehow compel God to spare Nineveh. The Talmud takes this perspective to its extreme by portraying the inclusion of animals as a form of blackmail: “If You will not have mercy upon us, we will not show mercy to these,” as if God must spare Nineveh — whether or not they repent — or else innocent hostages will be hurt. Indeed, God’s closing argument to Yonah could certainly be understood to mean that He spared them because He succumbed to this blackmail. He admits to sparing them because Nineveh had “more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well,” implying that His main concern was for those who were not guilty in the first place.

Ibn Ezra’s claim that Nineveh was a monotheistic city can be questioned as well. Ibn Ezra derived this claim from the absence of any mention of destroying idols as part of their repentance. However, that same piece of information leads Abarbanel to the opposite conclusion. He suggests that the text makes no mention of idolatry when describing their repentance because — like all Gentiles at that time — the people of Nineveh had always been pagans and continued to be pagans even as the text describes their repentance from “their evil ways.” According to Abarbanel, God forgave them on the basis of their repentance from interpersonal sins of corruption and injustice, but He knowingly turned a blind eye to their paganism, since He recognized that He could not destroy them for worshipping idols unless He wished to destroy every Gentile in the world.

Yonah’s Role

Rather than focusing exclusively on the behavior of the residents of Nineveh, it is also worth asking what role Yonah played in prompting the people of Nineveh to repent. After failing to escape from his mission in chapter 1, Yonah does travel to Nineveh in chapter 3 and warns them:
“Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown (adeon raveshet zo to shemesh humin)!” Thus, it seems that Yonah ultimately fulfills his mission as God instructed him to do. However, a closer look at Yonah’s conduct raises several questions about the manner in which Yonah executed his mission:

1) If Nineveh is described as being “a three days’ walk across (mahalach sheloshet yamim)” (3:3), then why did Yonah only enter the city “the distance of one day’s walk (mahalach yom echad)” (3:4), implying that he only went one third of the way into the city?3

2) Why did Yonah limit himself to a terse proclamation that the city would be destroyed in forty days? Shouldn’t he have specified which God sent him, why that God was angry, and which improved forms of conduct would convince that God that Nineveh had fully repented?4

3) Did Yonah make any serious attempt to contact Nineveh’s leadership? A simple reading of the text implies that “the news reached the king of Nineveh” (3:6) as it spread from person to person (vayiga hadavar el melech Nineveh), but not because Yonah ever met with the king directly.

The sum of these questions leads one to conclude that even when Yonah finally traveled to Nineveh, he nevertheless limited himself to doing the bare minimum to be able to claim that he was no longer disobeying God. He avoided any additional steps that might have guided Nineveh toward repentance.

**God’s Response to Yonah**

Let us now return to God’s final remarks to Yonah. Earlier, we questioned why God cited the large number of humans “who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many beasts” in order to justify His decision to spare Nineveh. After all, if the sinners repented, shouldn’t God have told Yonah that He spared Nineveh due to their repentance and not due to the size of their population?

The great medieval French commentator R. Eliezer of Beaugency suggests that Yonah left Nineveh without witnessing the city’s repentance. Hence, Yonah mistakenly believed that God had spared an unrepentant Nineveh. Rather than correcting Yonah by informing him of Nineveh’s repentance, God decided to educate Yonah about the importance of mercy and compassion by arguing that it would have been reasonable to spare...
Nineveh out of mercy even if the adults had not repented:

לדבריו ולשיטהו回复; שאף אם היה כמו
שהוא סבור, לא היה לו לכעוס על ذلك.

[God] answered [Yonah] according to
[Yonah’s] words and opinion: Even if it was as Yonah thought, he should not have become angry over that.

According to R. Eliezer of Beaugency,
God’s final conversation with Yonah
is based on the false premise that the people of Nineveh did not repent. Based on our discussion above, however, we can suggest that God did not base His comments on a false premise. If we are correct that Yonah only partially entered Nineveh, that he offered no information or guidance to them beyond a vague threat of destruction, and that he never spoke directly to Nineveh’s leadership, then perhaps the repentance that sounds so impressive in chapter 3 was only considered impressive in light of the people’s ignorance. Given that they received no meaningful guidance from Yonah, God was impressed by the manner in which the residents quickly mobilized to fast and how the king — who only heard of the threat secondhand — added his own call to fast and further implored his people to repent. God thus embraced their repentance despite its aforementioned shortcomings.

On some level, therefore, Yonah was correct to believe that this repentance was a quick-fix, executed by pagans whose perception of fasting was so ritualistic that they forced their animals to fast — as if the act of fasting had the intrinsic ability to manipulate God and was not merely a means for sinners to inspire themselves to repent. Yonah argues (4:2) that his entire mission was pointless, “for I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment”

כי ידעתי כי אתה אל חנן ורחום ארך אפים
וורב חסד ונחם על הרעה.

In essence, Yonah laments that God’s attribute of mercy prompts Him to settle for hasty, superficial repentance. In His response, God implicitly acknowledges that Nineveh’s repentance was less than optimal. However, He defends this decision on the grounds that Nineveh is filled with people who do not “know their right hand from their left.”

Notes

1. All translations of Biblical verses come from the new JPS translation.

2. ממה היה בכף ידיהם החזרו מה היה בשידה
תיבה ומגדל לא החזרו מה היה בשידה.

3. I am interpreting this phrase to mean that the city’s diameter was a three-day walk, which is Radak’s view. However, Ibn Ezra claims that the city’s circumference was a three-day walk, in which case Yonah would have crossed the entire diameter in one day.

4. Malbim raises these issues and thus concludes from these omissions — as we shall also conclude — that Yonah hoped Nineveh would fail to repent and would thus be destroyed.

5. Abarbanel interprets that phrase “who do not know their right hand from their left” in this vein. Based on his aforementioned claim that God overlooked Nineveh’s idol worship, Abarbanel explains that the adults of Nineveh knew nothing about the true God and therefore were not culpable for the sin of idolatry.

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