

Did Yonah Teach Nineveh to Repent?

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:

וַיִּרְא הָאֱלֹקִים אֶת מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם כִּי שָׁבוּ מִדְרָכָם
הַרְעָה וַיִּנָּחֵם הָאֱלֹקִים עַל הַרְעָה אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר
לַעֲשׂוֹת לָהֶם וְלֹא עָשָׂה.

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:

וְאֲנִי לֹא אֶחָוֶם עַל נִינְוֵה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה אֲשֶׁר יֵשׁ
בָּהּ הֶרְבֵּה מִשָּׂרְתִּים עֹשְׂרֵיהּ רַבּוֹ אֲדָם אֲשֶׁר לֹא
יָדַע בֵּין יְמִינוֹ לְשִׂמְאֹלוֹ וּבִהֶמָּה 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?



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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:

סדר תעניות כיצד מוציאים את התיבה לרחובה של עיר ונותנים אפר מקלה על גבי התיבה ובראש הנשיא ובראש אב בית דין וכל אחד ואחד נותן בראשו הזקן שבהן אומר לפניו דברי כבושין אשינו לא נאמר באנשי נינוה וירא אלהים את שקם ואת תעניתם אלא וירא אלהים את מעשיהם כי שבו מדרכם הרעה.

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 (תשובה גמורה אין כמוה). 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 (וישבו איש מדרכו הרעה) "Let everyone turn back from his evil ways and from the injustice of which he is guilty". 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

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 (שובה של רמיית). 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.² One of the proposed flaws in their repentance, however, is quite intriguing. It also appears in the parallel passage in the Babylonian Talmud:

מאי הוּו עבדי? אסרא הבהמות לחוד ואת
הוולדות לחוד, אמרו לפניו: רבונו של עולם
אם אין אתה מרחם עלינו - אין אנו מרחמים
על אלו.
תענית טז.

How did they act? — They separated the animals from their young and they said, Master of the Universe, if You will not have mercy upon us, we will not show mercy to these.

Ta'anit 16a

This claim speaks to a fundamental question about their fast: Were they fasting as a means to inspire character improvement, or were they fasting out of a belief that the ritual of fasting could somehow compel God to spare them regardless of whether they changed their ways? The aforementioned Mishnah assumed the former and thus held them up as

role models for an ideal fast. But one minor detail of their fast calls that assumption into question. The king ordered: “No man or beast — of flock or herd — shall taste anything (האדם והבהמה הבקר והצאן אל יטעמו מאומה)!” If the purpose of the fast is to inspire repentance, then there would seem to be little reason to coerce animals to fast. Accordingly, the king's proclamation might reflect the belief that the act of fasting could itself force 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 precisely 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

Why Do We Read Yonah On Yom Kippur?

The Gemara (*Megilla* 31a) states that we read Yonah for the haftarah of Mincha on Yom Kippur.

- a. Rashi (*Siddur Rashi*, #214) writes that we read it because of the teshuva of the people of Nineveh.
- b. R. David Avudraham (*Seder Tefilot Yom Hakippurim*) writes that we read it because we learn from Yonah that you cannot run away from your aveiros.
- c. R. Yehuda Shaviv (*Bein Haftarah LaParsha* pp. 216-223) notes another connection to Yom Kippur: There is an element of lottery in both. The *se'ir lazazel* was chosen through lottery. Similarly, the sailors used a lottery to determine who was at fault for the sinking ship.

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 (עוד ארבעים יום ויגוה נהפכת)” 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



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Nineveh out of mercy even if the adults had not repented:

ולדבריו ולשיטתו השיבו; שאף אם היה כמו שהוא סבור, לא היה לו לכעוס על כך.

[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 חנון ורחום ארך אפים) (ורב 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.” While this phrase might refer specifically to children who are too young to know right from wrong (Rashi, Radak), it could also allude to the fact that even the adults in Nineveh lacked meaningful knowledge of how to repent.⁵ After all, Yonah told them nothing about the God who sent him or His value system, hoping that the people of Nineveh would perish in their ignorance. God responded that in truth, Yonah's failure to educate them ensured that their incomplete repentance would suffice to save them. Without knowledge of why they were facing destruction, and without knowledge of how to properly repent, God accepted their best effort at repentance while implicitly blaming Yonah for failing to embrace the educational role of a prophet

and instead leaving the residents of Nineveh as 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. מה שהיה בכף ידיהם החזירו מה שהיה בשידה. תיבה ומגדל לא החזירו. The parallel passage in the Babylonian Talmud (*Ta'anit* 16a) cites Shmuel as insisting that they returned all stolen items, including stolen construction materials that they had already built into new buildings (אפילו גזל מריש ובנאו בבירה - מקעקע כל) (הבירה כולה ומחזיר מריש לבעליו).
3. I am interpreting this phrase to mean that they 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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