

Yom Kippur

We Are All Yonah

Moshe Taragin

The dramatic story of Yonah being swallowed by a whale exhibits classic teshuva themes. An entire metropolis of Ninveh, condemned to death, ultimately rallies, repents and is spared. Both Jew and non-Jew alike possess G-d-given and unlimited freedom of choice rendering teshuva a universal experience. Ninveh's last minute redemption also highlights that it is never too late for teshuva or character transformation. In fact, Yonah himself is caged in the belly of the beast, a few breaths from death until he is born anew. Though he is swallowed by a male he prays and is reborn in a female; his tomb has become a womb! Yonah's story captures so many teshuva messages!

Yet Yonah's initial fleeing remains perplexing. Where is he running and what exactly is his plan to abscond from G-d? Yonah, a prophet, should know better and is well aware that G-d can easily trace his journey. Where is he running and what is he thinking?

A careful read of his initial "steps" provides a partial understanding. He is described as walking away "MiLifnei Hashem" from the "presence of G-d" rather than the more common term of walking away "MeiHashem" which would connote simply departing from G-d. Yonah isn't parting with G-d but fleeing from the intense encounter with the presence of G-d. Of course, it is obvious to him that he can't flee from G-d and cannot hide from the Divine grasp; without question, G-d will discover his whereabouts. He isn't seeking to hide but merely to detach and disengage. He wants to quit the condition of standing in the

presence of G-d to avoid a state of intimacy, mindfulness and religious “focus”. Standing in the presence of G-d creates religious pressure, expectation and challenge, is a charged and intense encounter, and mandates responsibility and mission. Yonah craves a more relaxed and chilled mindset – one without intimidating challenges bearing down on him. He flees to Tarshish, a major commercial port, and hopes to blend in within the hustle bustle of daily life. In this busy environment, he isn’t forced to face the prospect of religious expectation and isn’t forced to wrestle with his Divine mission to stir Ninveh to mass repentance.

Interestingly enough, the exact same phraseology is employed to describe Kayin’s parting from G-d after his vicious crime. Living in a prehistoric age, Kayin like Yonah, could not possibly have believed that he could “lose” G-d or hide in a “mass of humanity”. He doesn’t flee G-d, but seeks a world without His presence and of course without guilt and without facing the consequences of his murderous act. He and Yonah are “escape artists” looking to flee from the pressure of religious mission or the pressure of moral guilt. Neither is running away from G-d but each is searching for a laid-back getaway without the pressure of moral expectations which religion creates.

At some point or another, we are all Yonah and we are all Kayin- we all part with G-d when we need to. At various points in our lives it is more convenient to create “distance” between ourselves and G-d. To enable our disobedient behavior, we require a degree of cognitive dissonance-imagining that G-d isn’t present and isn’t observing. We know this to be false, but we adopt a false reality to create space for misbehavior. We all experience the flight of Yonah.

The core viduy confession of Yom Kippur includes a trifecta of “chatanu, vinu, pashanu” with the latter phrase referring to moments of

rebellion. Most of us aren't hardened rebels denying G-d's presence or outright revolting against His authority. Instead we are passing rebels- temporarily asking G-d to leave the room or momentarily leaving the room ourselves so that we can attend to our "needs". We, as Yonah, acknowledge that this is fiction but yet we all walk out- even temporarily- from religious encounter with G-d. For this we all must confess "pashanu"- we have not denied Your presence but momentarily ignored it.

However, Yonah's mad dash to Tarshish is more than just departing from the intense glare of the Divine presence. As a prophet, he knows that sooner or later he will travel to Ninveh and fulfill his mission. However, he would greatly prefer that this be later rather than sooner. The timing is not right, the situation is too tense and 'hot', and Yonah would rather defer this journey to a different date. He isn't fleeing as much as he is delaying.

Chazal warn us against this type of religious procrastination. "If a person plans to sin and to repent, to sin and to repent, he isn't afforded the ability to perform repentance" (Yoma 85b). Of course, this warning doesn't address an outright hypocrite who flagrantly sins with the ridiculous plan of atoning tomorrow for today's sins. Such two-faced behavior requires no admonition because it is beyond absurd. Instead, Chazal refer to someone who desires teshuva and desires religious growth but delays and defers to some future date. It is this person whose teshuva is foiled.

Theoretically, every human being retains a perpetual ability for repentance. However, throughout life, we develop deeply conditioned habits which become ever more difficult to shatter. We all hope to excel at religion, but we often schedule that opportunity for "later in

life”, after we have succeeded in other areas we evaluate as more important or pressing. These patterns of religious procrastination become hardened and we are ultimately trapped in an invisible prison of habit and religious mediocrity. We are very much alive but severely constricted by the power of habit and conditioning. Of course, we retain the theoretical ability to achieve teshuva and growth but with each deferral it becomes less and less likely. The tragedy of Yonah urges us to halt our procrastination and immediately face religious challenge and strive for religious excellence.

Kesiva Vachasima Tovah

Moshe Taragin