



YONAH: THE LONELY PROPHET OF FAITH?

The Book of Yonah, which is read as the haftarah at Minchah on Yom Kippur, is typically understood as conveying a message of *teshuvah*, repentance, and its power to prevent disaster. From another perspective, however, it can also be understood as containing a message of true *emunah*, faith. In fact, the entire concept of repentance is ultimately dependent upon an individual accepting and firmly believing in the fact that God is, as it were, both capable of and interested in accepting repentance. Traditionally understood, proper *teshuvah* can completely erase all sin and consequences of sin. To illustrate the nature of this idea, consider the act of erasing words or pictures drawn with a pencil. When complete, we can still see a faded outline of the images. Only Hashem has the ability

to create and maintain a process in the world that completely erases certain actions and their effects. Moreover, the Gemara writes that when *teshuvah* is done correctly, the sins can actually become mitzvot; again, something only Hashem has the capacity to effect.¹ *Emunah*, unwavering faith in Hashem, is a prerequisite for *teshuvah*. We must accept that there is a God who can forgive in order to attain His forgiveness. It is this message of a deep sense of faith as a basis of repentance within the Book of Yonah that will be explored in this essay.

The book commences with Hashem commanding Yonah the prophet to convey a Divine message about the forthcoming destruction of the city of Nineveh, because the Ninevites have sinned greatly. Yonah's immediate reaction is to run away, fleeing on a

boat to Tarshish, a location in the opposite direction of Nineveh. Yonah's motivation to abandon his mission is unclear from the text.

וַיִּקַּם יוֹנָה לְבָרֵחַ תְּרִשִׁישָׁה מִלְּפָנֵי ה' וַיֵּרֶד יָפוֹ
וַיִּמְצָא אֲנִיָּה בָּאָה תְרִשִׁישׁ וַיִּתֵּן שְׂכָרָהּ וַיֵּרֶד בָּהּ
לְבוֹא עִמָּהֶם תְּרִשִׁישָׁה מִלְּפָנֵי ה':

But Yonah arose to flee to Tarshish from before Hashem's Presence. He went down to Jaffo and found a Tarshish-bound ship; he paid its fare and boarded it to travel with them to Tarshish from before Hashem's Presence.

Yonah 1:3

Traditional commentaries, including Rashi, explain that Yonah runs away toward Tarshish because he does not want to receive the prophecy.²

לברוח תרשישה - ים ששמו תרשיש והוא
בחוצה לארץ. אמר אברה לוי הים שאין
השכינה שורה בחוץ לארץ...

To flee to Tarshish — i.e., to a sea named Tarshish, which is outside the Holy Land. He said, “I will flee to the sea, for the Shechinah does not rest outside the Holy Land...”

Rashi 1:3

Rashi’s interpretation seems to be based on the words, “from before Hashem.” Yonah does not run away from Hashem, but rather from before Hashem’s face because he does not want to accept the mission of prophecy; he does not want to “see” Hashem’s face. In other words, he does not run away because he questions Hashem’s existence or doubts any of His powers; on the contrary, he has such a strong belief in Hashem that he runs away specifically because he believes in Hashem and he believes in His so-called “rules” of prophecy. He thus thinks and hopes that if he flees somewhere outside the Land of Israel he will not receive any Divine word. Indeed, the Midrash in *Shemot Rabbah* compares Yonah to Moshe Rabbeinu and Yirmiyahu, prophets who likewise initially refused their Divine missions and only reluctantly accepted their roles as prophets.³ Yonah is associated with other leaders who are known for their faith in Hashem and not with people who lacked conviction about Him or His singular greatness.

To further prove that Yonah does not seemingly have a problem with *emunah*, we may note that while Yonah is on the boat, he is interrogated by the sailors and the captain of the ship — they are frightened by the sudden storm and wake him up from his deep slumber, looking for answers. He responds with a strong declaration of faith:

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו הַגִּידָה נָא לָנוּ בְּאֲשֶׁר לָמִי הָרָעָה
הַזֹּאת לָנוּ מִהַ מְלֶאכֶתֶךָ וּמֵאֵינָן תְּבוּאָה מִהַ אֶרֶץ
וַאֲי מִזֶּה עִם אֶתְּהָה. וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֵיהֶם עֲבָרִי אֲנֹכִי

וְאֵת ה' אֵל-לְהִי הַשָּׁמַיִם אֲנִי יֹרָא אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה אֶת
הַיָּם וְאֵת הַיַּבֶּשֶׁת.

They said to him, “Tell us, now: in regard to whom has this calamity befallen us? What is your business? From where do you come? What is your country? And of what people are you?” He said to them: “I am a Hebrew and Hashem, the God of the Heavens, do I fear, Who made the sea and the dry land.”

Yonah 1:8-9

Usually, when prompted with a question such as, “What do you do? What is your profession?” and the like, a person responds, “I am an electrician, an educator, a doctor, a lawyer.” But that is not how Yonah responds. Instead, he explains his essence and his soul’s mission: “I fear God.” He is a runaway prophet attempting to avoid his mission, but he is a prophet nonetheless and he believes completely in Hashem.⁴

What, then, is Yonah’s flaw?

At the end of the book, Yonah is sitting and sulking outside the city of Nineveh. He is greatly distressed as he watches the Ninevites repent and thereby avoid destruction. He grows angry at Hashem for showing mercy towards the people of the city.

וַיִּרַע אֵל יוֹנָה רָעָה גְדוֹלָה וַיַּחַר לוֹ. וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל אֶל
ה' וַיֹּאמֶר אָנָּה ה' הֲלוֹא זֶה דְּבָרֵי עַד הָיִיתִי עַל
אֲדָמָתִי עַל כֵּן קִדַּמְתִּי לְבָרִיחַ תְּרַשִּׁישָׁה כִּי יִדְעָתִי
כִּי אֶתְהָ א-ל חַנוּן וְרַחוּם אֶרְךָ אַפַּיִם וְרַב חַסֵּד
וַיִּנְחַם עַל הָרָעָה.

This displeased Yonah greatly, and it grieved him. He prayed to Hashem, and said: “Please Hashem, was this not my contention when I was still on my own soil? I therefore had hastened to flee to Tarshish for I know that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, and relenting of punishment.”

Yonah 4:1-2

Here, Yonah clearly states that his motivation for running away was his deep sense of justice and righteousness. Many traditional commentaries explain Yonah’s anger as a reaction toward Hashem’s act of benevolence. Yonah actually wants Hashem to exact punishment on the Ninevites for their sins because he believes that they deserve it. He is thus furious that Hashem is compassionate and allows the Ninevites to repent from their evil ways, thereby avoiding the consequences of their earlier behavior.⁵ Why would this disturb him so much?

וּמָה רָאָה יוֹנָה שֶׁלֹּא רָצָה לִילֵךְ אֶל נִינְוֶה? אָמַר,
הֲעֵכָו"ם קְרוּבֵי תְשׁוּבָה הֵם אִם אוֹמֵר לֵהם
וַיַּעֲשׂוּ תְשׁוּבָה נִמְצָאתִי מִחַיִּיב אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל שֶׁאֵין
שׁוֹמְעִים לְדַבְּרֵי הַנְּבִיאִים.

Now what did Yonah see that he did not wish to go to Nineveh? He said, “The gentiles are quick to repent. Should I prophesize to them and they repent, I will be found condemning Israel, who do not heed the words of the prophets.”

Rashi 1:3

Rashi explains that as a Jewish prophet, Yonah sees himself as the defender of his people. He is concerned (and rightfully so) that if a non-Jewish nation would heed the words of Hashem’s prophet and repent by showing remorse for and correcting their wrongful actions, the Jewish people would be seen in a negative light, since they did not listen to their prophets and repent for their sins.

An alternative interpretation, however, is that it is Hashem’s benevolence and compassion that greatly bothers Yonah. He is angry that Hashem does not exact justice, but rather displays benevolence toward the Ninevites, giving them an opportunity to do *teshuvah* and ultimately not destroying them.

As noted, Yonah genuinely believes in Hashem. But true *emunah* means something more than just acknowledging Hashem's existence and His greatness. A deeper sense of *emunah* is achieved by also believing in Hashem's mercy in terms of His interaction with the world, even if we don't understand His ways. It is this type of *emunah* that Yonah was lacking. Yonah is introduced as the "son of Amitai," a phrase that can also suggest a title "Man of Truth."⁶ It is precisely because he is a "man of truth" that Yonah questions the entire concept of repentance and its impact.

bad people. We may contrast this to the Book of Iyov, which describes the terrible suffering of a good man and his conversations about it, addressing the topic of *tzaddik v'ra lo* — why bad things happen to good people — otherwise known as theodicy. Yonah cannot understand why the people of Nineveh are deserving of Hashem's mercy. But true belief in Hashem requires not just having complete faith in Him when things make sense and when only the righteous are recipients of His kindness, but also maintaining that same conviction when those who are seemingly undeserving are

upon 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?!"

Yonah 4:10-11

These two verses conclude the Book of Yonah; Yonah's reaction or response to Hashem is not recorded in the book. Generally, silence indicates acceptance and agreement.⁷ However, this particular ending has puzzled many because it seems like a strange conclusion, since there seems no closure. In fact, though, there is a clear closing message. Hashem declares: *I can have mercy on my creation even if you do not understand it. To have true faith in Me you must accept that.* This is actually similar to Hashem's final message to Iyov. Hashem rhetorically asks Iyov where he was at the time of creation of the world and how he could possibly expect to understand Hashem's ways. In essence, Hashem taught Iyov that His ways are incomprehensible to man.

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To him, Hashem's mercy and kindness cannot coexist with the notion of true justice and fairness.

Often, when people lose their faith, it is because they think and claim that Hashem is not benevolent. They question and doubt how Hashem could allow something — typically a terrible tragedy, whether personal or communal — to occur. They maintain that whatever happened should not have been allowed by Hashem to happen. Yonah, however, presents the opposite reaction: the tragedy at hand does not, in fact, take place when he believes it should have. In this sense, the Book of Yonah is about the theological question of *rasha v'tov lo* — why good things can happen to

recipients of His benevolence. This is what Yonah could not come to terms with.

This point is underscored in the very last verse of the book. Hashem says that even when His creations may be undeserving, He responds to repentance and shows compassion.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵתָהּ חֶסֶתְ עַל הַקִּיקַיּוֹן אֲשֶׁר לֹא עָמְלִיתָ בּוֹ וְלֹא גִדַּלְתָּו שָׁבוֹן לַיְלָה הִזָּה וּבֹן לַיְלָה אָבָה. וְאֲנִי לֹא אֶחֹס עַל נִינְוָה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה אֲשֶׁר יֵשׁ בָּהּ הַרְבֵּה מִשְׁתִּים עֹשְׂרָה רַבּוֹ אָדָם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יָדַע בֵּין זְמִינּוֹ לְשִׁמְאֵלוֹ וּבִהְמָה רָבָה.
Hashem said, "You took pity on the kikayon for which you did not labor, not did you make it grow; which materialized overnight and perished overnight. And I — shall I not take pity

אֵיפֹה הָיִיתָ בְּיַסְדֵי אֶרֶץ הַגֹּד אִם יָדַעְתָּ בִּינָה.

Where were you when I founded the earth? Tell if you know understanding.

Job 38:4

This same type of question — and lesson — ends the Book of Yonah. Hashem tells Yonah He is merciful on His creations even if Yonah cannot understand why.

On Yom Kippur afternoon, after finishing the Book of Yonah, we conclude the haftarah by appending some verses from the Book of Micah. We don't end the Yom Kippur reading with an open question. Instead, we read the verses from Micah that complete Hashem's list of His thirteen attributes of mercy, as a response to Yonah's anger against Hashem and to his own edited version of the thirteen

attributes, expressed earlier in the book.⁸

מי א-ל כְּמוֹךָ נִשְׂא עוֹן וְעֵבֶר עַל פְּשַׁע לְשֹׂאֲרֵית
נִחַלְתּוֹ לֹא הִחְזִיק לְעַד אַפּוֹ כִּי חִפְץ חֶסֶד הוּא.
יָשׁוּב יְרַחֲמֵנו יִכְבֵּשׂ עֲוֹנוֹתֵינוּ וְתִשְׁלַיֵךְ בְּמַצְלוֹת
יָם כָּל חַטָּאוֹתָם. תִּתֵּן אֶמֶת לְיַעֲקֹב חֶסֶד
לְאַבְרָהָם אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לְאַבְתָּינוּ מִימֵי קֶדֶם.

Who is a God like You, forgiving iniquity and remitting transgression; who has not maintained His wrath forever against the remnant of His own people, because He loves graciousness! He will take us back in love; He will cover up our iniquities, You will hurl all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will keep faith with Jacob, loyalty to Abraham, as You promised on oath to our fathers, in days gone by.

Micah 7:18-20

On Yom Kippur, we bring this deeper lesson of *emunah* back to *teshuvah*, which works even when it perhaps should not. Through the verses of the Book of Micah we profess our faith that Hashem has mercy and will bestow it upon us, even if we are not fully deserving, something that only Hashem can do. Indeed, “*Who is a God like you*” — *who else can do this?* The verses from the Book of Micah

constitute a proclamation of faith. And in as much as these verses are read at the conclusion of the Book of Yonah, we may understand Yonah’s silence as reflecting his ultimate acquiescence and acknowledgement of Hashem’s benevolence in accepting *teshuvah*, even from the otherwise undeserving.

We learn from Yonah that Hashem is benevolent, and that we must believe in that attribute as the basis for *teshuvah*. True faith means believing that Hashem may behave in ways that we cannot comprehend, such as by accepting *teshuvah*; that is the message of faith which Yonah teaches us. As Yom Kippur nears its end, we must acknowledge that we have faith in Hashem and faith that this *teshuvah* process works, even when this doesn’t seem to make sense. The Book of Yonah proposes the need for a fair standard for justice and raises doubt about the *teshuvah* process, but also presents a firm statement of faith that *teshuvah* works and that it works precisely because we have faith in Hashem and His mercy and kindness even toward the undeserving. Yonah knows that Hashem is a benevolent

God and that is what he initially challenges; the lesson he experiences sets an example for us. It is from Yonah’s ultimately clear message about true faith that we learn about the power of *teshuvah*.

Endnotes

1. *Yoma* 86b.
2. See also *Mekhilta* Bo, Hakdamah; Malbim 1:2, *Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer* 10.
3. *Shemot Rabbah* 4:5. Note that the Midrash says that Yonah was different in that he didn’t verbalize his refusal; he simply got up and ran away.
4. See *Radak* 1:10.
5. *Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer* 10; *Yalkut Shimoni* 550.
6. The description “the son of Amitai” in 1:1 can be understood to mean that Yonah’s father was named Amitai, or that Yonah was a man of truth (root: e.m.t.), similar to someone who is called a “ben/bat Torah,” meaning not that s/he is the son or daughter of Torah, but that s/he is a Torah-learned or a Torah-inspired person.
7. See *Yevamot* 87b where we are taught that silence is akin to an admission or an acknowledgment.
8. See *Yonah* 4:2.

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