

# Yonah's Prophetic Career

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## Yonah's Hesitation

Whenever I taught Yonah, one of the first questions students asked is why Yonah would not listen to Hashem and instead run away. When we begin to learn Yonah the reason doesn't seem clear and there are a number of approaches in Midrash and the commentaries. It should be noted that Yonah is very clear about the general reason he ran, the argument is more about what was behind his concern. At the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> perek Yonah says to Hashem:

Please, O Lord, was this not my contention while I was still on my land? For this reason I quickly fled to Tarshish, for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, with much kindness, and relenting of evil.

אָנָּה ה' הַלֹּא-אָנֹכִי דְבָרִי עַד-הַיּוֹתֵי עַל-אַדְמָתִי  
עַל-כֵּן קָדַמְתִּי לְבָרֶחַם תְּרַשְׁיָשָׁה כִּי יִדְעָתִי כִּי  
אַתָּה קָלִי-חַנּוּן וְרַחוּם אַרְוֶה אֶפְלִים וְרַב-חַסְדִּים  
וְנִחַם עַל-הַרְעָה

Yonah is very clear that he ran away because he was afraid that Ninveh would heed his call, repent and be forgiven by Hashem. The question that the commentaries grapple with is why this would be a concern. Isn't that every prophet's dream? Your message is well received. The people act on your admonition, repent and change their ways, returning to Hashem. There are at least three approaches represented in Midrash and commentaries to explain what Yonah was worried about, two of which I will mention here.

1) Yonah didn't want the Jews to look bad since they had been told many times to do Teshuvah and they hadn't. If Ninveh immediately turned around the Jews would look very bad by comparison (Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 11:5 quoted by Radak (Yonah 1:1,3) and Mahari Kra (Yonah 1:3))

2) Ashur (the country whose capitol is Ninveh) was going to be the nation which defeated & subjugated the Jewish people. Yonah hoped that if they were very sinful they would be destroyed. He didn't want them to do Teshuva when they would just be an enemy for the Jews (Metzudas Dovid (Yonah 1:3), Malbim (Yonah 1:2), Abarbanel (Yonah 1:2)). This idea is reflected in the Midrashic statement (Mechilta Shemot 21:1) that Yonah defended the honor of the 'son' (meaning bnei Yisroel), over the honor of the 'father' (meaning Hashem).

According to both approaches, Yonah's concern was about the well-being of the Jewish people (either their spiritual or physical standing) and made the decision to ignore Hashem's command in favor of what he saw as protecting the Jewish people.

## The Job of a Navi

Now that we have a better insight into Yonah's motives, we must ask why his actions are seen as inappropriate. Isn't a prophet supposed to try and protect the Jewish people? This is what Moshe did for his whole career: Offering to put the forgiveness of the Jewish people before his own personal safety (see, for example, Shemot Ch 32 in the aftermath of the sin of the golden calf). Eliyahu is taken to task for not defending the Jewish people and ultimately is no longer fit for the role of Navi (see Radak Melachim Alef 19:16 quoting the Midrash). Why isn't Yonah's refusal seen as a reasonable protection of the Jewish people?

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We might point to the fact that our other examples are not leaders who ignore Hashem's command. They engage, and even argue, with Hashem, advocating for the Jewish people, but they do not take matters into their own hands. Indeed, the Malbim explains that the lesson of the book of Yonah is that Hashem's design will come to fruition in the end and any machinations of mankind that are in conflict with G-d's will are ultimately futile. It is interesting to note that Yonah only reveals his concern after it had happened. "This is exactly what I was afraid of!" Perhaps if Yonah would have brought his concern to Hashem initially and tried to intercede on the Jewish people's behalf things would have been different.

Yechezkel (Ch 33) compares a Navi to a lookout of a city who is supposed to warn people of any danger before it reaches the city. He says that when a lookout does not do their job well, soldiers are surprised and may be killed, and the lookout bears partial responsibility. So too, a Navi is supposed to warn people about spiritual danger and if they neglect this responsibility then they also bear a part of the sin.

When I say of a wicked man, Wicked one, you shall surely die! and you did not speak to warn the wicked man from his way-he is wicked and for his iniquity he will die, but his blood I shall require of your hand.	בְּאֶמְרֵי לְרָשָׁע רָשָׁע מוֹת תָּמוּת וְלֹא דִּבַּרְתָּ לְהַזְהִיר רָשָׁע מִדַּרְכּוֹ הוּא רָשָׁע בְּעוֹנָו יָמוּת וְדָמוֹ מִיָּדְךָ אֶבְקֹשׁ:
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Yonah abrogates this sacred responsibility.

### Yonah's Earlier Roles

Yonah is only mentioned once outright in TaNaCh aside from his book. We find Yonah mentioned in Melachim (II 14:25) as a prophet during the time of King Yerovom ben Yoash<sup>1</sup> (Radak). The Midrash fills in some details about his roots including that his father was from the tribe of Zevulum and his mother was from Asher (see Yerushalmi Sukkah 5:1 & Malbim on Yonah) and that he was a student of the prophet Elisha (Pirkei D'Rebbe Eiezer 10). Most interestingly, according to the Midrash (Shachar Tov 26:7), Yonah was the son of the widow that Eliyahu revived in Melachim Alef chapter 17.

Rashi further identifies the unnamed prophet, disciple of Elisha, in Melachim Bet 9:1 who anoints King Yehu ben Yehoshafat and later delivers a prophecy to him (Melachim Bet 10:30) as Yonah. Anointing a new king and telling him he will overthrow the old king is not an easy assignment and yet Yonah seemingly does so immediately without any hesitation. Why is he so hesitant here, holding fast to his objections through the end of the sefer, even when he is called a second time?

Perhaps we can suggest that in his early career as a Navi, Yonah is just a conduit and is simply listening to orders without taking ownership or initiative. Perhaps this is why he remains

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<sup>1</sup> See Rashi there who quotes chazal who interpret this mention as comparing the situation there to Yonah's but not that Yonah was involved in prophecies to the king. Rashi himself says Yonah was the prophet who anointed king Yehu.

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nameless in these earlier prophecies. He isn't named and maybe he was just an instrument of Elisha but not more than that.

We should note that a disciple of a Navi taking initiative is not always positive. Gechazi is a model of inappropriate initiative. After Elisha heals Naaman and sends him away refusing payment, Gechazi runs after him and does extract payment. He breaks from the direction of the Navi and is punished for it.

Perhaps Yonah as well acts with initiative for the first time where before he simply followed instructions. While Yonah is more selfless in his initiative than Gechazi, he still acts outside of a relationship with Hashem. On one extreme is Yonah before he takes initiative, he is an instrument and not even named in the Navi. On the other extreme is acting on your own against Hashem's wishes, like Gechazi. Gechazi is punished by getting the Tzaraat that Naaman had (see Sotah 9b). Yonah is also punished measure for measure, he runs from prophecy and therefore after he is given his mission a second time he no longer ever gets a message from Hashem<sup>2</sup>.

### Yonah's Stubbornness: The Use of Foils

Yonah's stubbornness seems to be highlighted through the use of other minor Characters. All other characters in Yonah repent sincerely and quickly when they are told they have made an error. Yonah, by contrast, continues to hold fast to his hope that Ninveh does not repent and is angry at Hashem even in the last verses of the sefer. Although the Midrash records Yonah responding to Hashem saying "run Your world with mercy!", this is conspicuously absent from the sefer itself where stony silence on Yonah's part is the only recorded response to Hashem.

The first characters used as foils are the sailors on the boat Yonah tries to abscond in. The sailors on the ship are moved to repent after experiencing the exact same event that doesn't move Yonah at all. In fact, Yonah goes to sleep. He is not awake or open to recalibrating – he is stuck in martyr mode. The sailors are examples of those who work through a relationship with Hashem while Yonah runs and then is angry when Hashem drags him back and his concerns are realized. He has not learned his lesson.

The city of Ninveh is the second contrast to Yonah. Immediately upon hearing that they need to change their behavior they begin a city-wide Teshuva movement. Although there is some debate in Chazal about the level of sincerity of their repentance<sup>3</sup>, the Navi tell us that Hashem noticed their actions and it is evident that Ninveh is not destroyed. The alacrity with which they respond to Hashem's message is in sharp contrast with Yonah who ignores Hashem's message and needs to be imprisoned in a fish in order to finally convince him to change. As we have previously mentioned, even this shift seems only on the surface as Yonah continues to hope for Ninveh's destruction.

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<sup>2</sup> See my article, [Yonah, The Two Time Prophet](#) for an analysis of this

<sup>3</sup> See Talmud Bavli Taanit 16a as compared to Yerushlami Yaanit 2:1 and Yalkut Shimoni (Yonah 550). See also Meshech Chomcha on parshat Pinchas who tries to show that it may not be an argument.

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**Conclusion**

The purpose of a prophet is to sensitize others to their spiritual state and move them to make a change all in the name of Hashem. The prophet help people to form better relationship with Hashem, aligning them with the true purpose of the world (See the beginning of Derech Hashem by Rav Moshe Chaim Luzatto). Yonah is focused not on the ultimate purpose but the short term of the Jewish people – Ninveh repenting seems to represent a negative outcome for the Jews in the short term, so Yonah resists.

It is a shame that Yonah chooses to be creative and take initiative in this way. Although his heart is in the right place, he falls into the category of what the Chazon Ish (Emunah U'Bitachon Ch. 3) called *Oseh maaseh Zimri U'mevakshin schar k'Pinchas* – those whose act despicably like Zimri and yet expect reward like Pinchas (see the story of Pinchas, Kosbi & Zimri at the end of parshat Balak). The Chazon Ish applies this moniker to a situation where the leaders of a city are outraged by a behavior and condemn it strongly. They are confident that they are acting properly and so they put their full weight behind their reaction. The Chazon Ish explain that they were mistaken about the Halacha and were therefore pushing hard in exactly the wrong direction.

Perhaps we can learn a lesson that we need to make sure we are aligned with Torah value and the Halacha before we take strong stands against things. Good intentions are not enough, and we need to recognize when we are misaligned with Hashem. We are not prophets, so we have more subtle situations than running from Hashem's voiced command or arguing/complaining to Hashem. We must take the time to hear from others and carefully consider our positions and actions to make sure we take initiative in ways that are moving Hashem's agenda forward and not, G-d forbid, in conflict with making the world a more G-dly place.