

Sefer Yonah

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Why was *Sefer Yonah* chosen as the *haftara* for *mincha* on Yom Kippur specifically? What is the connection between this ספר נבואה, book of prophecy, and the most solemn day of the year?

In order to answer this question, we need to understand the main message of *Sefer Yonah*, which is best gleaned from an analysis of the events recorded therein.

The protagonist of the book, Yonah ben Amitai, was a נביא, a prophet of ה'. We know from Yonah's being discussed in *Sefer Melachim Bet* (14: 25) that he lived in גת החפר in Northern Israel in *Nachalat Zevulun*, the portion of Zevulun, and that he was therefore a citizen of *Malchut Yisrael*, the Northern Israelite kingdom. He lived during the time period of Yeravam ben Yoash, the last politically stable king of *Malchut Yisrael* before Assyria took over and became the driving force behind the exile of the Ten Northern Tribes of *Malchut Yisrael*. During Yeravam ben Yoash's reign the people experienced tremendous material prosperity and political stability but engaged in spiritual depravity. Yeravam ben Yoash expanded the country's borders, as had been prophesied in advance by Yonah himself, not because he or the people deserved it, but because ה' was not yet ready to destroy *Bnei Yisrael*. This is important to note, in order to truly understand Yonah's character, as his first recorded *nevuah* in Tanach was one in which G-d's *middat harachamim*, attribute of mercy, seems to have overridden His *middat hadin*, attribute of justice (G-d saved Bnei Yisrael even though they did not deserve it)!

Sefer Yonah begins with G-d calling upon Yonah to deliver his second *nevuah* recorded in *Tanach* to the city of Ninveh, the capital of Assyria, as a result of their evil ways. Based on what ends up unfolding in the third *perek*, it seems that G-d's goal was for Yonah to inspire the people of

Ninveh to do *teshuvah* from their evil ways in order to save themselves from impending destruction.

This *nevuah* begins with ה' telling Yonah קום לך אל נינוה, *get up and go to Ninveh*. Immediately following this *nevuah*, we are told indeed that Yonah got up - ויקם יונה - but instead of going to Ninveh as expected, he instead went in the opposite direction toward Tarshish, ברוח תרשישה מפני ה', to escape from G-d.

Why on earth would Yonah want to escape from G-d? Why did he attempt to avoid delivering the *nevuah* that G-d commanded him to bring the people of Ninveh?

There are several different approaches:

Rashi suggests that Yonah attempted to escape from this *nevuah* because if Ninveh did *teshuvah* immediately upon Yonah's rebuking them, they would make Bnei Yisrael look bad in comparison since Bnei Yisrael rarely respond to the rebuke of the *Nevi'im*. *Chazal* (in the *Mechiltah*) find fault with Yonah's reasoning: יונה תבע כבוד הבן ולא, *he demanded Bnei Yisrael's honor* (in not wanting to make them look bad in comparison to the people of Ninveh) but not G-d's honor (by not obeying His command)—in other words, Yonah put Bnei Yisrael's honor before G-d's honor. The Abarbanel also finds fault with Yonah's reasoning here, as suggested by Rashi: perhaps the *teshuvah* of the people of Ninveh would have inspired Bnei Yisrael to do their own *teshuvah*!

The Abarbanel claims that the reason why Yonah attempted to avoid bringing G-d's *nevuah* to the people of Ninveh was because he understood that in commanding him to deliver this *nevuah*, G-d was essentially asking him to save Assyria from destruction so that they could ultimately

conquer *Malchut Yisrael* and bring about the exile of the Ten Northern Tribes. However, Yonah did not want to be the means through which to save Assyria and thereby to destroy his own people.

Yet another reason for Yonah's attempted avoidance of delivering this *nevuah* was expressed by Yonah himself later in the *sefer*, על כן קדמתי לברח תרשישה כי ידעתי כי אתה קל חנון ורחום , *therefore I attempted to escape to Tarshish—because I knew that You are a merciful and gracious G-d who is slow to anger and full of kindness and changes His mind from evil.*

Why would G-d's being a merciful G-d cause Yonah to escape from His *nevuah*—what is the connection between the two? And, perhaps more importantly, why does Yonah view G-d's *rachamim* as problematic?

The *Da'at Mikra* suggests that in speaking of G-d's *rachamim* here, Yonah is really referring to G-d's receptiveness toward *teshuvah*. Yonah is questioning the inherent justifiability of the *teshuvah* process in the first place: Ninveh has perpetrated *chamas*, which is usually translated as stealing, but is really a general term for all *aveirot ben adam l'chaveiro* in which people persecute those who cannot defend themselves. These actions have consequences that can never be reversed (the murdered cannot be brought back to life, the suffering of the afflicted cannot be undone), and yet all the people of Ninveh have to do is put on some sackcloth, express regret, and they can escape punishment for all the evil they have perpetrated? That is not just! That is not what they deserve! What about all the people they have hurt?

If we think about this in terms of a national judicial system, this sentiment becomes clearer. Imagine someone is found guilty of murder, but he expresses regret for his crime. Would a court judge ever acquit this murderer on the basis of his remorse and set him free? Does the murderer's remorse nullify the fact that he has

killed someone? Of course not. Rather, the judge would still send him to jail as a punishment for his crime.

As a more extreme example, imagine Hitler never committed suicide, and several years after WWII was over, he expressed complete remorse for all the crimes against humanity that he had perpetrated. Should the world, and ultimately G-d, just accept his *teshuvah*, wipe his slate completely clean, and therefore not punish him for what he did? Does that seem fair? How could that ever be explained to all his victims and their families?

Professor Uriel Simon takes this idea one step further. He explains that Yonah conceived of G-d's *rachamim* and His acceptance of *teshuvah* as not only unjustified, but as downright harmful to society, as it undermines the force of judgement by removing the certainty of punishment, and thereby man's clarity of judgment, since it adds a factor that cannot be calculated in advance. In other words, in a world of *din* - judgement, reward immediately follows good deeds and punishment immediately follows sin—the relationship between one's action and its consequence is linear, clear, and immediate. However, once *rachamim* and *teshuvah* enter the picture, suddenly not all sins are punished (and, vice versa, not all good deeds are rewarded)—the relationship between one's action and its consequence is suddenly muddled and confusing, delayed and circuitous, and G-d's actions are no longer clear at all.

Perhaps Yonah already learned this lesson after his first *nevuah* given during the time of Yeravam ben Yoash, when G-d did not destroy Bnei Yisrael even though they deserved to be destroyed as a result of their sinful behavior, because G-d decided to use *rachamim* instead and delay their punishment. Yonah saw that rather than teach Bnei Yisrael the valuable lesson that they had better change their ways lest they be destroyed, this act of G-d's mercifulness instead led Bnei Yisrael to believe that changing their ways was

unnecessary because they could always depend on G-d's mercifulness to save them instead.

Rabbi Yissachar Yaakovson, in his book, *Chazon HaMikra*, explains that whereas *Iyov* questioned the existence in this world of *צדיק ורע לו*, *why bad things happen to good people*, *Yonah* questioned the existence of *לו רשע וטוב לו*, *why good things happen to bad people*. In other words, *Iyov* challenged G-d's *מדת הדין*, *attribute of justice*, and *Yonah* challenged G-d's *מדת הרחמים*, *attribute of mercy*.

The following famous events of *Sefer Yonah* - the ship being caught in a storm, his volunteering to go overboard to save the others on board, his being swallowed and then spit out by a fish—precipitate an outward turnaround in *Yonah*, in that he finally delivers G-d's *nevuah* to *Ninveh* as he was originally commanded. Unfortunately, however, these events do not seem to precipitate any change in *Yonah's* internal philosophies about the ideas of *teshuvah* and *rachamim*.

In fact, his immediate reaction in the first *pasuk* of *Perek Daled*, upon seeing the people of *Ninveh* saving themselves from destruction by doing *teshuvah* is: *וירע אל יונה רעה גדולה ויחר לו*, *this was a great evil to Yonah and he was angry*. He then davened to 'ה complaining that He was a merciful G-d, quoting the famous *י"ג מדות הרחמים*, *Thirteen Attributes of Mercy*, in describing Him. Yet he stops short in his quotation—notably, substituting the *middah* of *emet*, truth, with a new description of his own: *ונחם על הרעה*, *[He] who changes His mind from evil*.

Why does *Yonah* substitute the *middah* of *emet* with this new *middah*? Because that was his fundamental problem with 'ה that 'ה was not exercising *emet*, truth, which is inherently a *middah* of *din*, an attribute of judgment, but was rather *נחם על הרעה*, *changing His mind from evil*, i.e. exercising *rachamim*.

Yonah ben Amitai, whose father's name shares the same root as *emet*, truth, could not fathom

G-d's lack of *emet*, as his very essence represents *emet*.

In stark contrast to *Avraham Avinu*, the embodiment of *chesed*, lovingkindness, who fought unsuccessfully for the salvation of *Sodom* and *Amorah* when faced with its impending destruction, *Yonah* the embodiment of *emet*, truth, fought unsuccessfully for the city of *Ninveh's* destruction when faced with its successful *teshuvah*.

One of the less famous stories of *Sefer Yonah*, which we are not taught in preschool, is its concluding story of the *kikayon*. This story has generated a lot of discussion throughout the ages, and therefore many different interpretations, because it is quite complicated.

We are told in *Perek Daled* that in light of *Yonah's* failure to convince 'ה to destroy the people of *Ninveh* as he feels they deserve, he asks 'ה to take his life. When 'ה refuses, *Yonah* leaves the city of *Ninveh*, builds himself a *sukkah* to protect himself from the sun, and sits in its shade in order to see what would happen to the city. We are then told that 'ה miraculously grows a *kikayon*, a tree whose seeds produce oil and whose leaves offer a lot of shade, above *Yonah's* head in order to provide him with shade and to save him from his distress regarding *yeshuat Ninveh*, *Ninveh's* redemption. We are told that this *kikayon* made *Yonah* very happy: *וישמח יונה*, *in direct contrast to his former feeling of רעה גדולה*. However, 'ה summoned a worm the next morning at dawn to kill the *kikayon* and cause it to dry it up. He also summoned an eastern dry wind that caused the sun to burn upon *Yonah's* head, causing him to faint and ask 'ה a second time to take his life. 'ה then scolds *Yonah* for being angry that He took away his *kikayon*, accusing him of having had mercy on a tree that he did not work for or put any effort into, and which only existed for one day, but yet he was angry with 'ה for having mercy on a large city with many people and animals within it, who did not know the right path.

There are many, many questions we can ask about this story, but we will suffice with the four main ones:

1. Why would 'ה provide Yonah with a *kikayon* for shade if he had just built himself a *sukkah* for that very purpose?
2. If Yonah did not really need the shade, why did the *kikayon* make him so exorbitantly happy?
3. Why did 'ה provide something for *kikayon* only to suddenly take it away from him?
4. What is the meaning of 'ה's cryptic message to Yonah at the end?

Rav David Fohrman suggests that the *kikayon* was meant to represent the experience of רחמי 'ה, *G-d's mercifulness*, in several ways. Firstly, *rachamim* represents the giving of “unnecessary gifts,” and the *kikayon* provided Yonah with unnecessary shade. Even more so, 'ה granted Yonah this gift of extra shade even though he was undeserving of it, having been a recalcitrant messenger who escaped and explicitly disapproved of 'ה's mission. In addition, like all *rachamim*, the *kikayon* just appeared from out of nowhere. It did not grow naturally from a seed, but was miraculously placed there by 'ה making its very existence “unjustified” because there was no logical explanation for it. In these ways, the *kikayon* represented a gift whose very existence was simultaneously unnecessary, undeserved, and unjustified: the epitome of רחמי 'ה.

Perhaps that is why the *kikayon* caused such great *simcha* in Yonah—because he had received an unexpected gift from 'ה. Despite his philosophical demands to the contrary, when he became the recipient of 'ה's *rachamim* himself, he instinctively felt its warmth and comfort.

G-d then took this unexpected gift away from Yonah so suddenly to let Yonah experience himself what the world would be like the way he claimed it should be run: על פי דין, *with judgement* only, without *rachamim*. For if the world would have no *rachamim*, then he would

have no *kikayon*, which had no real reason to exist, as Yonah he had no real reason for its shade.

This experience caused Yonah to be so angry that he wanted to die—for the second time in the *perek*. However, this time his death wish was not a reaction to a lack of *din* on the part of 'ה (as was the case when Ninveh was saved), but rather to a lack of *rachamim*. This represents a true internal change on the part of *Yonah*.

For the first time in the *sefer*, he had personally experienced (both physically in terms of the shade and emotionally in terms of his *simcha*) the full benefits of 'ה רחמי 'ה through the *kikayon*, as opposed to merely philosophically contemplating them. Furthermore, he was subsequently subjected to the physical and emotional pain (i.e. fainting and death wish) of its loss. Perhaps this personal experience of the pain caused by a lack of *rachamim* led him to rethink his original philosophical position on *rachamim*, enabling him to begin to appreciate its logic and internalize it. In fact, 'ה describes Yonah as having felt compassion himself: אתה חסת על הקיקיון, *you had mercy on the kikayon*.

Rav Fohrman explains that Yonah began to think: it may be true that the *kikayon's* existence may not be justified, but neither is its destruction justified, since it will provide so much good (its leaves provide much-needed shade and sick people used to take advantage of it). In other words, he was no longer focusing on the past in search of a justification, but on the future. The argument of *din* is that we must constantly look at one's past and ask, do past actions justify the current situation? *Din* acts based on *emet*, ensuring that the current reality truly corresponds to the past reality. However, *rachamim* has a completely different logic. *Rachamim* comes from the term *rechem*, womb, as it nurtures and promotes life. The womb is not indiscriminate, and it is also critical in terms of determining which life it supports. But *rachamim's* question is different than that of *din*, for if the womb asked every egg that entered into it what past actions it had done that justified

its existence and made it deserve to live, there would be no pregnancies. Rather, instead of focusing on the past, the womb focuses on the future - what potential does this egg have? Is it viable? The womb will reject an egg if it deems it incompatible with future life. But if it is viable, the womb will nurture its growth and support its survival. This is the focus of *rachamim*—not on one's past but on one's potential in the future. That is why *rachamim* responds positively to *teshuvah*—because the power of *teshuvah* stems not from its ability to change the past (which it cannot, as *din* would correctly argue), but from its ability to change the future.

Now that יונה has finally demonstrated his capacity for compassion in the context of the *kikayon*, ה' is now ready to articulate His lesson to Yonah in full force:

ה' says to Yonah: You have finally reached a philosophical awareness of the need for *rachamim* when it came to the *kikayon*, seeing its potential to help others, even though you did not invest any effort in it, and you only experienced its good for the duration of one day. Now do you understand why I saw a need to have *rachamim* upon an entire city of people that I myself created and that has existed since the beginning of time (implied by its great population size—both human and animal), whose myriad of people sin due to mere lack of knowledge, and therefore have tremendous potential to improve their ways once correctly educated?

In other words, yes, it is true that they sinned, and according to *din*, they should be destroyed. But Yonah's own argument about the *kikayon* applies here as well, for while it is true that their continued existence may not be justified due to their past חמס, their destruction is even more unjustified because of their great potential to do good in the future. And their great potential lies in the fact that their past sins were perpetrated due to lack of knowledge—because all they have to do is learn, and then their sins will stop in the future.

Perhaps this instance is one of the most important messages of *Sefer Yonah*, demonstrating the true essence of *teshuvah* - not only about its importance, of which we already know, but about how and why it really works. Most people believe that *teshuvah* is about changing the past; that by doing *teshuvah* we can essentially erase our past deeds and start with a clean slate. What *Sefer Yonah* teaches, through ה' s educational messages to Yonah, is that *teshuvah* does not work by changing the past but by changing the future. By doing *teshuvah* we are essentially changing ourselves. By abandoning our past ways (not by erasing them, because that is impossible, but by leaving them), we are becoming different people with much greater potential to do good than we had before. That is why part and parcel of *teshuvah* is to say *viduy*—we don't ignore our sins, but rather, we approach them head on and actively change our relationship with them from one of intimacy to one of distance, and ultimately of complete disregard.

This message is so important to internalize on Yom Kippur because the day is essentially the culmination of an entire *teshuvah* process that began in Elul. During Mincha, as we are about to approach Yom Kippur's end, it is important not to lose sight of the message that *teshuvah* is about the future more than it is about the past, so that we can look toward our future and keep up what we have worked so hard to accomplish in the past month and a half. The nature of inspiration is to die down, so we read *Sefer Yonah* on Yom Kippur to remind ourselves that the entire point of the day is for the future, and we have to therefore work that much harder at it as we move forward.