

# Insights on the Book of Jonah

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## 1. Care Enough to Forgive and Educate

Twice a year the prophetic portion (haftarah) read in the synagogue is comprised of a whole book of the Bible. The haftarah of parashat *Vayishlah* is the book of Obadiah, and the haftarah read following the Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) afternoon Torah reading is the book of Yonah. This practice is ancient. A *baraita* in *masekhet Megilla* (31a) that lists the Torah and prophetic readings for the holidays states, “for minhah (the afternoon service of the Day of Atonement) the Torah portion is prohibited sexual relations and the haftarah is the book of Yonah.”

Neither the *baraita* nor the talmud explain the Haftarah choice. Later scholars have proposed several explanations. Since the book describes the repentance (teshubah) of the city of Nineveh, it is an appropriate choice for the Day of Atonement, which culminates the Ten Days of Repentance. [A similar explanation is given by the 11th century student of Rashi – R. Simha ben Shemuel (Mahzor Vitri)]. Abudirham gave another reason: “To teach man that there is no escaping God.” In his sermon for Yom Kippur, R. Yehoshua Ibn Shu’eb explained the choice.

The prophecy of Yonah ben Amitai comes to teach that God’s mercy is upon all His creations, even on the nations of the world, and more so on Israel. That is why we read this haftarah on this day in the afternoon service as it is a most propitious time. (Berachot 6b)

While these explanations all contain true aspects of the book that might suffice as to the haftarah choice, none fully explains the message of the book. If the point of the book is

to teach the efficacy of teshubah, or that there is no escaping God's will, the book could have ended at the third chapter—after Yonah's unsuccessful flight and after the successful teshubah of Nineveh. True, "God's mercy" is depicted in the story, yet that term does not precisely identify the book's full message. God's compassionate nature takes a specific form in this work; that of the tolerant, patient but persistent educator. This is seen primarily through God's relationship with Yonah. Recognizing this is essential to comprehending the book's message. A more complete appreciation of that message deepens our understanding of the haftarah choice.

## **2. Care enough to teach – and teach again.**

This is the behavior which God models with Nineveh and Yonah. God attempts to teach this perspective to Yonah. Yonah himself has a different attitude. He "knows the truth" about God and morality. He is unconcerned with those who have yet to learn and who sin in their ignorance.<sup>1</sup> Truth demands punishment of immorality. That is why Yonah, son of Truth ("ben ammitai" means "son of my truth"), refuses God's bidding. Although this is not apparent from the story's beginning,<sup>2</sup> it is the only valid explanation of

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<sup>1</sup> Yonah's lack of concern for the suffering of sinners is seen not only in his refusal to help Nineveh repent, but also in his behavior on the floundering ship. He knows why the sea is stormy and instead of using his knowledge to save the idolatrous sailors, he retires to a deep sleep in the hold of the ship. Ironically, the sailors show more concern for Yonah's life than he shows for theirs. After knowing that Yonah was the cause of their difficult situation, and after being told that the way out is to throw him overboard, they still "rowed hard to regain the shore," only throwing him over as a last resort.

<sup>2</sup> This literary device of only revealing the reason for Yonah's flight as a flashback teaches the reader to reserve judgement of a situation until

Yonah's flight. It is the one which Yonah himself gives as he prays for death after successfully completing God's mission. Careful attention to what Yonah says (and omits) in that prayer illuminates his ideology.

This displeased Yonah greatly, and he was grieved. He prayed to YHWH saying, "O, YHWH! Isn't this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment. Please, YHWH, take my life, for I would rather die than live." (Jonah 4:1-3; NJPS)

Yonah knows God's nature. He partially quotes God's attributes (see Exodus 34:6-7)--significantly stopping before the attribute of Truth! He could not bring himself to mention that attribute because he speaks the truth, and in truth, God is not "true." Instead, God is "renouncing punishment." In Yonah's view, truth demands retributive punishment. Yonah enumerates the divine attributes derisively.<sup>3</sup> You, God, are not as true as I, Yonah son of truth! Therefore kill me.

This is Yonah's second prayer of the book. The first prayer, for salvation – following Yonah's refusal to heed God's

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one has some distance. One should reevaluate retrospectively in light of newly revealed information.

<sup>3</sup> God's attribute of truth is also found in Psalms 86:15. Moshe and Yoel also omit this attribute. Moshe omits it when he is praying to fend off Israel's annihilation following the spies' report (Numbers 14:18). Yoel omits it when he is encouraging Israel's repentance to stave off God's advancing horde (2:13--Yoel actually substitutes "renouncing punishment"). Both these prophets omit the divine attribute of truth in situations where it is better left unsaid. Yonah omits it when he is describing what he knows about God.

command, was fulfilled by God. The second prayer, following Yonah's successful performance of God's command, was refused by God. Instead, God responds enigmatically in a taunting way, "Are you good and angry?" God now has Yonah's attention. Yonah is no longer silently rejecting, as after the first command to go to Nineveh. Nor is he silently submitting, as after the second command to go to that city. Although Yonah is contentious, he is finally speaking sincerely. God can now patiently proceed to teach His "know-it-all" student. God shows more patience with Yonah than Yonah shows himself. Yonah's philosophy, applied to himself, demands that he should be killed. Also, Yonah refuses to live in a world so untrue.

God does not give up on Yonah. God attempts to teach Yonah, again. Since experience is the best teacher, God creates an experience that would serve as an analogy for Yonah – the sprouting and the wilting of the "gourd" (or some other plant). Yonah's extreme happiness about the gourd contrasts with his extreme displeasure about the salvation of Nineveh. In fact, he is more distressed about his own discomfort than he is about the salvation of the city. Yonah does not learn from the event directly. He has to be prodded by God to draw the lesson.

Then YHWH said: You cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. And 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! (4:10-11; NJPS)

The lesson, although expressed in terms of the gourd, is really about Yonah. Yonah is not really concerned with the gourd, but with himself. (The gourd is an analogy for

Yonah himself, who, like any mortal, “appears overnight and perishes overnight.” See Veba`areb Na p. 242). The lesson is that God cares about the development of man; collectively, as in the city of Nineveh, or individually, as in the repeated attempts at educating Yonah (and saving him).<sup>4</sup>

Yonah, who had definite ideas about how God should run His world, was the most difficult character to educate. The idolatrous sailors and the corrupt and thieving Ninevehites repent relatively quickly; the sailors- responding to the obvious hand of God in their salvation, and the Ninevehites- reacting to the warning of the prophet. Yonah, so closed-mindedly certain of the correctness of his outlook, has to be taught and shown time and time again. God patiently persists in teaching Yonah to be more tolerant and caring of people, and also more aware of their ability to develop. We do not know if Yonah got the message, but we can see how God’s belief in the potential of His creations, including Yonah, caused Him to care enough to teach them, repeatedly if necessary.

This message is particularly encouraging on the Day of Atonement. Suffering is not retribution, but education. God wants us to be educated and not necessarily punished. It is sufficient to learn without the punishment. But more

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<sup>4</sup> The beasts are mentioned because they typify the not yet developed. Yonah was unconcerned with the advancement of the people of Nineveh, just as beasts are considered beyond development. Yet the people of Nineveh consider the beasts, as they also participated in the mourning practices associated with their repentance. (Although this appears strange to contemporary ears, the book of Yehudit 4:9-10 describes how, “... Every man of Israel cried out very strongly to God, and they afflicted themselves with a great fast, them and their wives and children and animals.” Also Herodotus 9:24 describes how the Persians in mourning would: “shear the hair of their heads, also of their horses and pack animals.” *Olam Hatanakh* p. 229)

important than the encouragement is the lesson that we should be more forgiving of those that wronged us in the past year – seeking not their punishment but their growth. Thirdly, we should be more patient with ourselves and the mistakes that we have made, patiently realizing that growth implies previous deficiency, and forgiving ourselves while vowing to learn from our mistakes.