

Darshan Yonah 5778 (2017) – Keith Eaton

Everyone has a calling which we must hear, heed, and work toward realizing. Yonah is a story about what can interfere with accomplishing one's mission.

Six months ago, Rabbi Borodin asked me to be Darshan Yonah. I was flattered, but had significant trepidation. My background is in science and I don't have much experience with writing or public speaking. Nonetheless I am here before you, I heard her call and did not flee.

I have always found the prophetic books somewhat difficult to relate to. The idea of prophesy, "hearing a message from G-d" and then proclaiming it publicly is not something that we experience in our daily lives.

I immersed myself in the study of the Book of Yonah. I have found it both approachable and daunting at the same time. In just 48 verses, it tells a rich story with multiple interpretations and much commentary from over two millennia.

The Book of Yonah has few words of prophesy. It tells a story, but it is not historical. Elsewhere in the Tanach we see supernatural events, but the Book of Yonah is superlative in this respect.

In my view, this story is not about the sailors, the fish, or the Ninevites – it is about Yonah, his internal struggles and his relationship to G-d. The sailors and Ninevites are two-dimensional, they have such exemplary behavior that one is led to believe that their purpose is to provide a backdrop. Only Yonah is complex.

The book begins:

*"The word of the LORD came to Yonah ben Amitai:
Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim judgment upon it; for their wickedness has come before Me"*

This is Yonah's call, his mission. G-d is very clear about what he wants Yonah to do.

Sometimes our mission is thrust upon us and sometimes it is something we must search for.

What are our callings? It may be work, family, community, the environment or helping the poor. By its nature, a calling is a difficult task. It is this difficulty which, in part, imbues it with meaning.

Yonah heard his call, it was unambiguous, but he did not heed it. He attempted to flee to Tarshish by ship, but he could not escape G-d. G-d set a tempest upon the ship and it became clear to the sailors that this was due to Yonah. He told the sailors to cast him into the sea, in essence to kill him, and they reluctantly agreed to do so. G-d then put Yonah in a “time out” by providing a giant fish, in which he remained three days. Yonah had time to reflect and pray. He then vowed to perform the task G-d has set for him and he was spewed out of the fish onto dry land. This was G-d giving Yonah a chance to do teshuva for his failing. He went at once to Nineveh and proclaimed his prophecy *“forty days more, and Nineveh will be overturned”*, just five words in Hebrew:

OD ARBAIM YOM, VENINEVEH NEHPACHET

The Ninevites believed G-d, and all from King to beast put on sackcloth and fasted. G-d saw their turning from their evil ways and renounced their punishment. (And here chapter 3 ends.) This complete teshuva and forgiveness is the traditional explanation of why the Book of Yonah is read on Yom Kippur.

The story could have ended at this point, but there is a 4th and final chapter which begins:

“This displeased Yonah greatly, and he was grieved.”

I will come back to this 4th chapter later, but first I have two related questions:

Why did Yonah run from his mission? and

Why, when he apparently succeeds in precipitating the repentance of the Ninevites, does Yonah become so unhappy?

One classic explanation for Yonah’s flight is that he feared physical harm. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire, which was hostile to the Israelites. Another is that, Yonah, being a prophet, saw into the future and knew that the Assyrians would later harm the Israelites.

By not revealing the reason for Yonah's flight early in the story, each listener interprets his actions through their own lens. Not until his mission is complete is the following explanation stated:

He prayed to the LORD, saying, "O LORD! 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 G-d, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment."

Yonah knew that G-d was going to forgive the Ninevites. Why was this so troubling to him?

Yonah was not afraid of failure, he was afraid of success.

Yonah was worried about dishonor or embarrassment – for himself, the Jewish people, and G-d:

His reputation as a prophet was at stake – If he said Nineveh was going to be overturned, but it was not, he could be labeled as a "false prophet".

The honor of the Jewish people was at stake. Tanach is full of prophets exhorting the Jews to change their ways, but this does not happen. In the Book of Yonah, we have the only example of a Jewish prophet speaking to non-Jews, and the decree results in their complete repentance – this was not good for the Jews! Indeed, later Christian commentators viewed Yonah's reluctance to give his prophesy as an example of Jewish particularism, the exclusive attachment to one's own group.

The honor of G-d was also at stake. If G-d said that Nineveh was to be destroyed and it was not, it could be seen as a sign of G-d's weakness rather than forgiveness.

Yonah lacks humility. He is a "know it all" who disagrees with his teacher regarding what the right course of action is. He knows the truth. In Yonah's eyes the Ninevites were evil and should be destroyed. His worldview does not accept the idea that they could adequately do teshuva. G-d's acceptance of the repentance of the Ninevites is profoundly disappointing to him.

Yonah's prayer which I quoted before is an excerpt from G-d's 13 attributes which are familiar to us from the Yom Kippur liturgy. They derive from Exodus chapter 34: verses 6 and 7 where G-d has given Moses the 10 commandments and is explaining His nature:

Adonai, Adonai, a G-d compassionate and gracious (rachum vechanun), slow to anger (erech apayim), abounding in kindness (verav chesed) and faithfulness (emet), extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin.

However, when Yonah invokes this, one can imagine that his tone is ironic: he is describing what G-d is doing, but not praising it. He does not include the word *emet*, translated here as faithfulness, but *emet* also means truth. Yonah ben Amitai (Yonah the truthful) is upset that G-d is forgiving, and cannot bring himself to say that G-d is true or “faithful” to his word regarding the punishment of the Ninevites.

Unlike Moses and Abraham who argued with G-d on behalf of others for forgiveness or mercy, Yonah, valuing truth over compassion, was unhappy that G-d was forgiving.

How can we bring the lessons from the Book of Yonah into our lives?

In many stories in Tanach we have heroes such as Abraham or Moses, who while not perfect, work in partnership with G-d.

Here Yonah is not the typical hero but rather an antihero or tragic figure.

From G-d we learn what to do and from Yonah we learn what not to do.

G-d is the hero here, he models a patient teacher: giving second chances, “providing” many learning experiences, and demonstrating compassion.

Unlike Yonah, we do not get a direct call from G-d.

Mission, calling, purpose, meaning: I use these words interchangeably to connote an important task in life. I encourage you to think about what gives your life meaning. This is part of hearing the call.

Our mission can cause great satisfaction and great difficulties – for many of us, raising children is our most important mission. Just as G-d provides for Yonah, we “provide” for our children an environment in which they can grow, discover and work toward their purpose.

I am a cancer doctor, this is one of my callings in life. I have the honor and privilege of working with patients and families at their most vulnerable times - as they face death. Proximity to death often invites introspection.

The repetition of “Who shall live and who shall die” and the imagery of being inscribed in the Book of Life are meant to focus us on teshuva, turning from bad. I hope we are also prompted to turn toward good - to search for meaning.

Two challenges can lead to existential crises: not having a clear sense that one’s life has had meaning and a feeling that one’s work is unfinished.

In a somewhat ironic twist, five years ago I was diagnosed with leukemia and was faced with the possibility of my own death.

The most helpful and insightful framework I found for understanding this difficult time was developed by Viktor Frankl.

Frankl was a psychiatrist who lived for three years in Nazi concentration camps. Despite the near impossible conditions, he found a way to find meaning in even the most difficult and dehumanizing of circumstances. His experiences and approach were published in English as “Man’s Search for Meaning” and later developed into his psychological theory – “logotherapy,” which posits that striving to find meaning is the primary, most powerful motivating and driving force in our lives. The principles are:

Life has meaning under all circumstances, even the most miserable ones.

Our main motivation for living is our will to find meaning in life.

We have inalienable freedom to find meaning.

It is this sense of meaning that enables people to overcome painful and difficult experiences.

We can find meaning in life in three different ways:

by creating a work or doing a deed;

by experiencing something or encountering someone;

and by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering.

After my diagnosis, I stopped working and had a lot of time to reflect. In my searching, I found the writings of Rabbi Sacks who in turn led me to Viktor Frankl. I found his ideas comforting. My biggest surprise during my year and a half of illness and intensive treatments was my acceptance of my possible

death. I reflected on my life and felt that I had lived a life of purpose up to that point. While my mission was not complete, I had felt I had worked toward a purpose. I was not always “happy”, but I was content.

I am surprised to say that my experience was best summarized by a quote from Nietzsche:

He who has a why to live can bear almost any how.

Understanding our mission can be a great source of strength.

Once we have identified our calling, we must also consider what can impede us.

Today – let us reflect upon our callings and through study of Yonah’s failings, learn how we may better be able to answer our call.

We should learn that we need to repair ourselves to better fulfill our mission.

Yonah’s flight from G-d is unique in the bible, other prophets say they are not worthy or argue, but none flee.

From Yonah we can learn to recognize our callings as legitimate –don’t run, argue – In Judaism we are taught to question.

From Yonah we can learn not to let our fear of embarrassment stop us from pursuing our mission.

From Yonah we can learn not to let our loyalties or particularism blind us to the intrinsic worth and suffering of others.

From Yonah we can learn that we do not always know what truth is, and to be receptive to new ideas. We should approach life with a sense of humility, understanding that we do not know all of the answers.

From Yonah we can learn to understand our emotions, recognizing when they do not “fit the facts” and that sometimes when our urge is to flee we should approach.

Today, as we are thinking about teshuva, I ask:

Did Yonah do teshuva?

He is a reluctant prophet who fulfilled his mission, but his attitude remained the same, he still believes his version of the “truth”.

He is neither happy nor content.

Judaism puts great emphasis on “right action” and in the end Yonah did do the right thing. His mindset however did not change.

I want to return now to Chapter 4 where we left off:

Yonah was deeply aggrieved.

He built a sukkah outside the city to see what would happen to the Ninevites.

G-d provided the kikayon plant which grew overnight and gave him respite from the harsh sun.

Jonah was very happy about the plant.

But the next day at dawn G-d provided a worm, which attacked the plant so that it withered.

Yonah begged for death, saying, “I would rather die than live.”

Then G-d said to Yonah, “Are you so deeply grieved about the plant?” “Yes,” he replied, “so deeply that I want to die.”

Then the LORD 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! (?)”

G-d provides an object lesson for Yonah. He is telling Yonah that he needs to be bothered about Nineveh.

Just as the kikayon served a purpose for Yonah, so must the Ninevites serve a purpose for G-d.

G-d is hoping that Yonah will learn from his suffering.

Although the Hebrew in our story does not have punctuation marks, it is likely that the story ends with a question mark.

It is unclear that Yonah has learned the answer to G-d’s question.

I will close with a quote I found on Rosh Hashanah, in our machzor (page 154) from Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe:

*“If you see what needs to be repaired and how to repair it,
then you have found a piece of the world that G-d has left for you to complete.*

*But if you only see what is wrong and how ugly it is,
then it is you yourself that needs repair.”*

May we all find meaning.

May we all find and repair that within ourselves that needs repair.

May we all help to bring about tikkun olam.

And when you hear your call, be like Abraham or Moses and answer: “hineni”, here I am.

G'mar chatimah tovah.