

# Yonah: The Unusual Messenger

## Rabbi Maury Grebenau

### Yom Kippur 5774

At a number of points in the sefer, Yonah's behavior deviates significantly from what we normally see from a Navi. We are used to Neviim being given a message that they deliver, at which point their role in the narrative usually comes to a close. Yonah initially flees and refuses to give the message and then when he finally does give the message he remains watching and the focus of the sefer ends with him. How can we understand his unusual behavior and what can we learn from it?

#### I. Yonah Flees

Normally a Navi's job is to deliver a message. We find the Torah using the term Navi in this way when Hashem tells Moshe that he need not worry about his speech impediment since Aharon will be "your Navi" (Shemot 7:1), meaning your mouthpiece who will deliver the message to Pharaoh on your behalf. Yonah first deviates from a Navi's role when instead of traveling to deliver the message he flees to Tarshish.

The commentaries grapple with how Yonah could think he would be able to outrun Hashem. Some explain that Yonah was running to leave Israel since a prophet can only get prophecy in Israel<sup>1</sup>. The Malbim adds that Yonah wanted to go to the place least conducive to prophecy so he boarded a boat full of idol worshippers headed out to sea where he wouldn't have the presence of mind necessary to hear a message from Hashem (see Pesachim 117a). The Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 21:5) compares Yonah and Adam in that they both didn't want to fulfill Hashem's command and they both didn't remain "*b'kavod*" (in their honor/status) as Adam was expelled from *Gan Eiden* and Yonah lost his status as a prophet<sup>2</sup>.

Hashem responds to this deviation directly. Rashi quotes the Midrash that compares the situation to a Kohen whose servant flees into a cemetery where he knows the Kohen will not follow him. The Kohen remarks that he has plenty of messengers to retrieve the servant. In this case Hashem's messengers are a storm and subsequently a fish. In both cases the pasuk uses language that specifically points to the fact that these messengers were intentionally miraculous to leave no ambiguity in the message to Yonah that this was Hashem pulling him back on course. The Malbim (1:4) points out that the pasuk uses the phrase that '*V'Hashem Hitil*' because it was unnatural for the wind to blow like that at that time<sup>3</sup>.

Similarly, the pasuk uses the word "*VaYiman*" to describe Hashem sending the fish which is continually used in the sefer to describe Hashem's interventions. The Malbim (3:2) explains that

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<sup>1</sup> See Radak Yonah 1:3, Kuzari (2:14) and Talmud Bavli Moed Kattan 25a & Maharitz Chiyus there

<sup>2</sup> See my essay [Yonah, the Two Time Prophet](#)

<sup>3</sup> Rashi (1:7) and others go so far as to say that the wind only impacted the ship Yonah was on and they were able to see other ships sailing along unaffected

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Yonah is being given a second chance and is essentially reborn into the role of prophet. As such, he is given an experience of being inside another creature similar to that of a fetus.

The Me'am Loez also points out that is measure for measure, Yonah ran from Hashem and so he is confined in a fish. The Rashbam (Bereishis 32:29) points out that we frequently find Hashem limiting the movement of someone when they do something which flies in the face of Hashem's instructions or goals. For example, Bilaam's leg is crushed (Bamidbar 22:25) when he tries to curse the Jewish people and Moshe is swallowed by a snake when he travels before circumcising his son (Shemot 4:24, see Rashi there)

Both the storm and the fish are very intentionally miraculous with very clear messaging for Yonah. Yonah strays from the role of a prophet and Hashem clearly communicates that he is on the wrong path. Hashem first uses nature in an unnatural way and when this is not enough Yonah is given a 3-day sustained miracle inside a fish.

### **II. Yonah Stays**

We find a very similar structure at the end of the sefer: Yonah remains after he delivers the prophecy in a way that is unusual for a prophet and Hashem again clearly communicates that Yonah is out of bounds through miraculous means.

Radak (4:5) explains that Yonah camps out in the East of the city due to his skepticism about Ninveh's repentance. He waits and watches to see if they will revert back to their sinful ways. The Malbim adds that Yonah expects some sort of consequence even if the initial decree against Ninveh has been repealed. Yonah seems to struggle with the mercy he sees from Hashem. In fact, that Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni Yonah 550) adds a response of Yonah to Hashem's final monologue of the sefer: "Run Your world with mercy!" It seems that initially this is exactly what Yonah does not understand<sup>4</sup>.

Here as well, Hashem responds to Yonah staying after he delivers the prophecy by growing a Kikayon tree and then sending a worm to gnaw at its roots. The same cycle as before, Hashem first utilizes nature and then sends a creature. Once again, the language of *VaYiman* is used for both of these messengers. It seems to stress that these occurrences are a (2 part) message from Hashem. In this case, Hashem even communicates with Yonah directly. The Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 19:4) includes Yonah in the list of four people who are asked a question and do not respond well. Yonah is being told that he has again strayed from the role of a Navi.

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<sup>4</sup> Rav Bachrach points out that Yonah is not the only prophet to struggle with this idea, Moshe also did not understand '*erech apayim*' (T.B. Sanhedrin 111a) and we find this as a general challenge for prophets (Talmud Yerushalmi Makkot 2:6).

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### **III. Lessons**

Perhaps Yonah feels challenged with the role of messenger, he looks to understand the plan both at the stage of mission and also outcome, but he does not understand mercy and allowing for repentance. We see this this very challenge attributed to prophets in general when the Gemara frames their response to sin as needing punishment and it is only Hashem that explains there is repentance (T.Y. Makkot 2:6). Yonah embodies this response of the prophet, trying not to deliver a warning at all and then remaining to watch, skeptical of repentance and pining for justice in the form of punishment.

We must learn from Yonah not to flee and not to wait. Life is a delicate balance, as the Mishna says, we do not need to finish the work but we are also not free to ignore it (Avot 2:16). The Gr"m understood the entire book of Yonah, on the level of Remez, to be a story of each of us. Yonah is every soul that is sent into this world to do a job but instead flees from their responsibility. We can't flee from our obligations even when we are frustrated by our lack of understanding. We do not have the luxury of waiting till it all makes sense either. The Talmud (Pesachim 50a) tells us that only in the next world will we truly understand the ways of Hashem, *Bayom Hahu* – on that day, but not in this world. Yonah is the struggle of each person to have more control and to understand fully. Our job is to recognize that these impulses can lead us to flee when we have a job to do or to stay and watch when we need to move on and act. May we be given the wisdom to know our role and the strength to carry it out!