

Yonah: A Final Prayer?

Rabbi Maury Grebenau

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Of the many fascinating aspects of the book of Yonah is not just that Yonah struggles with Hashem's command to go to Ninveh but the extreme to which he goes to. Other individuals in TaNaCh have intense dialogues with Hashem such as Avrohom (regarding Sedom) Moshe (in defense of the Jewish people and complaining about their actions), Iyov (as he struggles with why he has lost so much) and Eliyahu (Hashem's response from the whirlwind) but Yonah takes his struggle to the extreme when he finally prays to Hashem "please take my soul from me, for better is my death than my life! (4:3)." This essay will first briefly explore how praying for death appears in traditional sources to provide context and then will move to analyzing Yonah's words and actions in this area.

Survey of Talmudic Sources

We begin by citing the source that suicide is forbidden, a Gemara¹ that Rashi quotes on the Torah.

Bereishis (9:5) & Rashi

וְאָךְ אֶת דַּמְכֶם לְנַפְשֵׁיכֶם אֶדְרֹשׁ מִיָּד כָּל חַיָּה אֶדְרֹשׁוּ וּמִיָּד הָאָדָם מִיָּד אִישׁ אָחִיו אֶדְרֹשׁ אֶת נַפְשׁ הָאָדָם

But your blood, of your souls, I will demand [an account]; from the hand of every beast I will demand it, and from the hand of man, from the hand of each man, his brother, I will demand the soul of man.

וְאָךְ אֶת דַּמְכֶם - אֵף עַל פִּי שֶׁהִתְרַתִּי לָכֶם נְטִילַת נֶשְׁמָה בְּבִהֵמָה, אֶת דַּמְכֶם אֶדְרוֹשׁ מִהַשּׁוֹפֵךְ דָּם עֲצָמוֹ
Although I have allowed the killing of an animal, I will demand the blood of someone who spills his own blood.

We could make a simple argument that praying for your own death is no different than suicide and we would then expect that it is forbidden. The same logic would dictate that praying for another person's death would be akin to murder. However, it seems clear from Talmudic source that this is not a correct comparison.

In the Talmud we find a number of other examples of people davening for death:²

¹ Bava Kamma 91b

² The HaEmek Sheilah (Shiltos 93:9) understands that the Gemara in Rosh HaShannah 17a where Rav Papa commands that burial shrouds are prepared for Rav Huna to be a case where Rav Papa had given up on his life and thought it was better for him to die. It is not clear that there was any prayer for death (the context of the Sheiltos is the Gemara that the Ran comments on but the point seems to be the comparison of giving up on someone rather than prayer specifically) and Gemara ends with Rav Papa's embarrassment when Rav Huna recovered which seems to be a counter source if anything.

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- Choni Hamaagal prays for his own death at the end of his saga (Taanis 23a) and there is no indication that he was wrong to do so.
- When R' Yochanan loses his mind after Reish Lakish's death the rabbis pray for his death (Bava Metzia 84a). It can be argued that a person of Rav Yochanan's stature who has lost his mind was an exceptional case and we can't draw conclusions about praying for another's death.
- The Yerushalmi (Shabbos 19:2) has a story that (according to one version) Rav Acha bar Ada davened for his injured child to die³.

While Rav Menashe Klein (Shu"t Mishneh Halachos 9:398) comments that the story of Choni HaMeagel and Rav Yochanan are difficult to understand (a *pelah* and *Tzorech Iyun*), we do not find widespread condemnation, or even much discussion, about their actions which seems to point to the fact that praying for death is certainly not considered actively bringing death to oneself or others. However, none of these sources is utilized as a source for allowing praying for someone's death. We also have a counterexample in R' Meir (Brachot 10a) who prays for wicked people who are bothering him to die but his wife, Bruria, tells him this is not correct and to instead pray for them to cease their wicked ways. From this Gemara alone it would seem that praying for someone's death is not allowed but it is not clear if Rav Meir was wrong only to deal with the wicked this way or if praying for someone's death is altogether prohibited.

Praying for Another Person to Die

The two sources that are most quoted as the source for being allowed to pray for someone to die in certain circumstances are the story of Rebbe's maid and a comment of the Ran. The situations are ones where the prognosis is that a person is at death's door and they are also in immense pain.

Talmud Bavli (Kesubos 104a)

ההוא יומא דנח נפשיה דרבי גזרו רבנן תעניתא ובעו רחמי ואמרי כל מאן דאמר נח נפשיה דר' ידקר בחרב סליקא אמתיה דרבי לאיגרא אמרה עליוני' מבקשין את רבי והתחתוני' מבקשין את רבי יהי רצון שיכופו תחתונים את העליונים כיון דחזאי כמה זימני דעייל לבית הכסא וחליץ תפילין ומנח להו וקמצטער אמרה יהי רצון שיכופו עליונים את התחתונים ולא הוו שתקי רבנן מלמיבעי רחמי שקלה כוזא שדיא מאיגרא לארעא אישתיקו מרחמי ונח נפשיה דרבי

The day that Rebbe died, the Rabbis instituted a fast, prayed, and said "Anyone who says 'Rebbe should die' should be run through with a sword. Rebbe's mother went up to the roof and said, "Those above want Rebbe and those below want Rebbe! Those below should win over those above." Once she saw how much pain Rebbe was in, she said, "Those above should win over those below!" Yet still the Rabbis didn't stop praying. She threw a vessel to the ground and they stopped and Rebbe died.

³ The circumstances around this case are different since the motivation did not stem from the lack of viability according to the simple reading and the classic commentaries. See Korban Haedah and Alei Tamar there.

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Rebbe's maidservant (Kesubos 104a) both interrupts the prayer of the rabbis who were asking that Rebbe continue to live and she also seems to daven for his death when she says "those below should win over those above". Although there is discussion about the fact that the rabbis did not seem to agree with Rebbe's maidservant, this is often brought as the main example that seems to allow for praying for someone to die. The Ran that is quoted is in a different context.

Talmud Bavli (Nedarim 40a)

כי אתא רב דימי אמר כל המבקר את החולה גורם לו שיחיה וכל שאינו מבקר את החולה גורם לו שימות מאי גרמא אילימא כל המבקר את החולה מבקש עליו רחמים שיחיה וכל שאין מבקר את החולה מבקש עליו רחמים שימות סלקא דעתך אלא כל שאין מבקר חולה אין מבקש עליו רחמים לא שיחיה ולא שימות

All who visit the sick cause them to live and all who don't visit the sick cause them to die. What causes it? If you will say that when one visits the sick he prays for them to live and one who doesn't visit the sick prays for them to die, do we really think they will pray for them to die?! Rather, all who do not visit the sick do not pray for them either to live or to die.

Ran (Nedarim 40a)

נראה בעיני דה"ק פעמים שצריך לבקש רחמים על החולה שימות כגון שמצטער החולה בחליו הרבה ואי אפשר לו שיחיה

It would seem that this is what the Gemara means, there are times when one needs to pray for a sick person that they should die, for example if they are very pained in their sickness and it is impossible for them to live.

This Ran is the source in Rishonim for the possibility of permitting praying for someone to die⁴. This topic is too detailed to give a full summary and regardless is an area of Halacha best left to experts. For our purposes we can note that both the outcome of the Halacha and also how to interpret the story of Rebbe is subject to much analysis and debate. Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach also points out that we continue to violate Shabbat to save the life of someone who we are praying for their death. Unlike Rav Eliezer Waldenberg who sees this as an indication that Hashem values even such a life and we should therefore not pray for their death, Rav Auerbach still feels the Ran in normative Halacha. Some poskim⁵ suggest a less definitive approach such as davening for the pain to end which leaves open the possibility of both healing and death to accomplish that goal. Others simply leaving the question of if praying for another's death is permitted a requiring further study (*tzorech iyun*)⁶.

⁴ It should be noted that in addition to the fact that other Rishonim don't mention this idea of the Ran, there are also other understanding of this line in the Gemara. The Rosh seems to understand the words to mean one who does not visit will not end up praying for the sick person and that lack of prayer may contribute to their death. Rashi seems to say it means when someone neglects visiting they don't know the condition of patient and are unable to pray.

⁵ Teshuvot VeHanagot Responsa 2:82 & 2:738

⁶ Shu"t Shevet haLevi 10:292 & 10:26

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Among the objections to applying the Ran practically are:

- Although the Ran does seem to understand that one may pray for another's death other Rishonim do not bring this and among classic Halachic sources only the Aruch HaShulchan quotes this⁷
- It is frequently not clear when things are actually hopeless and this can change from moment to moment⁸
- Even when doctors give a hopeless prognosis, they are not always accurate in their predictions⁹
- Even those poskim who allow praying for another's death only do so if one's intent is 100% pure which is a high bar¹⁰
- This can only be done when all other options have been exhausted including praying for recovery¹¹

Many poskim also add stipulations about the situation including: the patient's condition is hopeless in terms of potential recovery or even improvement, they are in intense pain and they are not in possession of their faculties

The aspect of the discussion that will help us when it comes to Yonah's actions is the treatment of prayer for death and if it is considered an active shortening of life or a lack of action, which are treated very differently in Halacha. Both Rav Moshe Feinstein¹² and Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach¹³ seem to treat praying for someone's death as not taking action towards shortening their life (which would be expressly forbidden). Rav Moshe (74:1) adds a potential reasoning for this stating that the logic when it comes to prayer is different because of the opaqueness of the cause and effect as opposed to medical interventions where the cause and effect are more understandable from our perspective.

Praying for your own death

In addition to the points already made it seems clear that davening for one's own death is not the same as davening for someone else's death. Even according to those who either do not feel the permission to daven for someone's death is Halachically normative or that it requires so many

⁷ Shu"t shevet haLevi, Tzitz Eliezer suggest it may be "*nidcheh miHalacha*"

⁸ Shu"t Shevet haLevi 10:292 & 10:26

⁹ Tzitz Eliezer (Ramat Rachel Ch. 5)

¹⁰ Even when a family member (for example) prays with only the interest of their sick relatives in mind, they may unconsciously also be considering the significant emotional or financial toll that such a situation can cause

¹¹ Igross Moshe Choshen Mishpat Chelek 2 Siman 74:4)

¹² Igross Moshe Choshen Mishpat Chelek 2 Siman 73:1 & 74:4

¹³ Minchat Shlomo Responsa, volume 1, 91:24

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stipulations so as to make it practically forbidden, for a person to pray for their own death seems to be treated differently.

In addition to Yonah (who will explore in the third section), Moshe (Bamidbar 11:15), Eliyahu (Melachim Alef 19:4) and perhaps even Yirmiyahu (20:14-18) ask Hashem to end their lives. Some of those who feel praying for death is more normative bring these examples as well as those in the Gemaras above. While this may partially be another clear proof that davening is not considered an action (since otherwise this would be suicide) there seems to be a further distinction between prayer for oneself which is less problematic¹⁴ than praying for another's death.

Understanding the prayer of Yonah

Looking at Yonah specifically, we will examine three places where Yonah may be looking to end his life. The most explicit is at the end of the Sefer when Hashem asks why Yonah is so upset, he responds (Yonah 4:8) *tov mosi michayai* - it would-be better to die than to live¹⁵. This is closest to the general discussion of if one may pray for their own death.

There are two other times in the sefer where it is possible that Yonah wants to end his time on this world. Earlier the Sefer, Yonah tells the sailors toss him over the boat. The Ibn Ezra (1:12) says that Yonah wanted them to toss him over to his death since he is the reason for the storm.

אבן עזרא יונה פרק א

ויאמר - מתאוה ומבקש למות ולא תשוב נינוה לשם ולא היה אומר להם ככה לולי ששמע מפיהם כי ישליכוהו:

Yonah desired and asked to die and not have Ninveh return to Hashem. He would not have said this to them if not for the fact that he heard from their mouths "let's throw him over."

The Ibn Ezra clearly says that Yonah wanted to die rather than for Ninveh to repent¹⁶ although he explains that Yonah would never have suggested this had he not first heard them planning to do exactly that. This doesn't necessarily mean Yonah was not wanting to end his life. It is not clear from the Ibn Ezra if he means that Yonah would not have suggested it because he was not in such a state of mind or if he would not have thought this suggestion would be well-received if not for the fact that they were already entertaining it.

¹⁴ In that it is not subject to the level of scrutiny and analysis in the Halachik authorities we see with praying for another person's death.

¹⁵ See Malbim who understands differently that Hashem was asking why Yonah was so upset over such a minor thing and Yonah responded that it was not a small thing, he almost died. According to this interpretation Yonah is not praying to die.

¹⁶ For more on why Yonah would feel this way please see my previous essay
<https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/1038179/Yonah's-Prophetic-Career>

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Finally, the first time we may have Yonah giving up is when he initially gets on the boat. While the sailors are all praying Yonah goes below deck and goes to sleep. This is very peculiar and we need to understand why Yonah did this. Clearly this is important since we are told about it in the pasuk. In general, most narratives in TaNaCh likely included eating and sleeping but they are not mentioned unless they are there to teach us something. Clearly this is not just Yonah taking a nap – we are being given an insight into Yonah through this fact. We find at least 4 approaches:

- 1) **Mahari Kra** – He knew he had sinned to Hashem & his prayer would not be accepted, so he just went to sleep not caring what would happen to the boat
- 2) **Rabbeinu Bachya** (Kad HaKemach) – Yonah was so confident that Hashem would save him that he went to sleep.
- 3) **Ibn Ezra** – Because of the difficulty and pain sea travel
- 4) **MeAm Loez** - Yonah was trying to do something that would be a fulfillment of the prophecy of him dying w/o this actually taking place¹⁷. So he went to the depths (of the ship) and went to sleep which is considered a microdose of death¹⁸.

According to the Ibn Ezra we are getting an insight into the context, rather than into Yonah's state of mind. Mahari Kra and Rabbeinu Bachya take almost completely opposite approaches to Yonah's state of mind, from being confident that Hashem will come to his rescue to being confident that Hashem will not. In terms of how this incident helps us understand Yonah's state of mind, according to MeAm Loez Yonah is actively trying to improve his position while the Mahari Kra describes a Yonah who has given up. Although he does not go so far as to say Yonah was essentially praying for death, one later commentator does just that.

Rav Dovid Luria in his commentary to Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer (Ch. 10, note 32) makes a direct comparison of Yonah's sleep to Eliyahu praying for his life to end.

ויונה בצרת נפשו נרדם וישן לו. מפרש מ"ש וישכב וירדם, היינו שבצרת נפשו ישן לו, וכענין מ"ש באלהו [מלכים א, יט, ד] וישאל את נפשו למות וגו' וישכב וישן תחת רותם אחד וגו', (ולא כמ"ש רבינו בחיי בכד הקמח שלו [אות כפורים א] שהיה שוכב נרדם בטוח בה' שיודע שלבו לשם שמים ויצילהו מהצרה הזאת)

That is, that in the suffering of his soul he fell asleep, similar to what it says by Eliyahu “and he asked his soul to die”... and he lay down and fell asleep under one of the bushes (not like Rabbeinu Bachaya who says that he slept confident that Hashem knew his reasons were proper and would save him).

Taking these three instances into account, it seems credible that Yonah was praying for him own death and perhaps not as an isolated incident. Why is this something that is not condemned in the traditional sources?

¹⁷ Similar to the Gemara (Gittin 35a) of Rabbah bar Rav Huna where the students actually overturned his chair when a woman cursed him that his ‘chair would be overthrown’

¹⁸ See Brachot 57b that sleep is 1/60 of death

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Conclusion – Praying for one's own death revisited

We began by noting that praying for death is not equivalent to actually taking a life and also noted that there is much discussion about praying for a person in great pain to expire. When it comes to praying for one's own death, we do find examples both in the Talmud and also in TaNaCh including Yonah. We noted that this requires some explanation – why is it that we would not treat davening for your own death in a similar way to davening for someone else's death?

One approach is that praying for one's own death may be different since the sick person can be excused due to his agony¹⁹. Meaning, fundamentally there may not be a significant difference, but when someone is in great physical or psychological pain they aren't held to the full Halachic standard. With this approach, the lack of discussion about Yonah and others is not indicative of praying for one's own death being treated differently.

A talmid chacham I spoke to offered another option that Yonah, Eliyahu and others who prayed for their own death understood that their job on this world had been accomplished and asked to move to the next stage of existence. This would explain why davening for oneself would be so different. It would also mean that this is something that is no longer applicable at all since none of us are at a level to know when our unique mission in this world has been completed.

Either way, it would seem that our takeaway from this discussion should be how seriously these issues are taken which gives us a sense of how precious life is to Hashem, even during life's most challenging times.

Perhaps we can offer one more approach that will leave us with one more lesson. Maybe praying for one's own life and death is not similar to praying for another person's death at all. When it comes to praying for another person, we can accept that prayer is not an action but still, at its core, tries to impact the world and the sick person's situation. Maybe we could see praying for one's own death very differently. Perhaps a prayer at these most difficult times is not really understood as trying to impact reality at all. It is connecting to Hashem through honest dialogue expressing how difficult we find our circumstances. Maybe when Yonah cries out that death would be preferable to life, more than a prayer for an outcome he is letting his pain overflow as he connects with Hashem, in a way similar to our daily Tachanun when we fall on our faces in an emotional supplication to G-d.

Maybe the lesson we can take away from these situations is appreciating the sense of psychological safety needed to really open up to Hashem in this way. On a deep emotional level we much approach Hashem as the ultimate parent who loves us unconditionally to share our deepest challenges and feelings, as Yonah did. May we merit to truly approach Hashem as our Father in Heaven this year on Yom Kippur, and always.

¹⁹ See R. Yitzchak Zilberstein (Shu"t Avnei Choshen III, p. 498)