

Yom Kippur

The Message of Jonah.

Being Human

How should we assess the Teshuva (repentance) of the people of Nineveh? Is it possible for an entire city to undergo a comprehensive behavioral turnaround? At the heart of the Book of Jonah lies an intriguing contradiction, with specific verses offer conflicting indications regarding the authenticity and thoroughness of Nineveh's repentance.

The storyline of Chapter Three seems to present the inhabitants of Nineveh as exemplars of penitence. Jonah calls the townsfolk to repent and they respond with alacrity, from commoner to king, fasting, donning sackcloth, praying, and repudiating their sinful lifestyle. This enthusiastic repentance engenders God's swift forgiveness, and He rescinds His decree of destruction. The chapter's closing lines affirm this positive assessment:

When God saw their acts and that they had turned from their evil ways, He relented and did not bring on them the destruction He had threatened. (3:3-10)

The contrite and transformative behavior of Nineveh becomes the paradigm of Teshuva, highlighted by the Mishna in describing the order of prayer for a ritual fast-day:

What is the order of the fast-days? The ark containing the scrolls of the law is to be brought to the city square... the elder shall then address them in heart-moving terms: **"My brethren, consider that it is not written in respect to [the repentance of] the Ninevites, that God regarded their having wrapped themselves in sackcloth, and considered their fast-days, but that 'God saw their acts, and that they had turned from their evil ways' (Jonah 3:10),** and the tradition of the prophets also is, 'Tear your hearts, and not your garments' (Joel 2:13)."

The town elder as cited by the Mishna conveys the powerful idea that fasting and sackcloth are merely the outer trappings of repentance, whereas the requisite change must be a fundamental reorientation of lifestyle. Nineveh epitomizes this ethic. Though they did fast and don sackcloth, this was not the critical element. Instead: 'God saw their acts, and that they had turned from their evil ways.'

"...AND ALSO MANY ANIMALS?"

But this perspective is thrown into disarray as we read the final Chapter of Jonah. There, the dour prophet undergoes a dramatic emotional collapse as the gourd plant which shades his head from the sun, withers and dies.. In despair, Jonah seeks his own death. At that point, God seeks to illustrate a point about Nineveh, by referring to the demise of the gourd. God argues:

You had pity upon this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals? (Jonah 4:10-11)

For now, let us merely focus on God's central argument. God challenges Jonah and says: Look! You cared so deeply about a simple plant that you never earned or deserved. You are so deeply upset at its death. Should I, then, not be concerned for the fate of 120,000 humans and animals?

Now, there are two questions raised by this verse. First, why are the humans grouped with the animals? What is this peculiar equivalence? The book of Jonah ends off with this last ringing note: "And many animals?" and we wonder what this reference to the animal world might convey.

But second, after having read Chapter Three, we are puzzled as to the logic of God's closing statement. Are Nineveh's inhabitants to be spared solely because they are alive? These people are not merely in existence like a plant, passive and growing unawares. These are autonomous human beings who have demonstrated a deliberate choice to be responsive to God and to repair their ways. Should God not have said: "And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who **have repented fully before Me?**"

Chapter Four seem to ignore the fact that Nineveh has in fact earned its reprieve. God perceives these humans just like animals, helpless as a gourd; "they cannot tell their right hand from their left." Why is the repentance of Chapter Three ignored?

We must conclude that from Chapter Four's perspective, the repentance of Nineveh is insignificant. But this creates a mystery of sorts. Why is it ignored? Was it flawed in some way?

THE GREAT RABBINIC DEBATE

Rabbinic opinion is divided as to the extent and sincerity of Nineveh's actions. All opinions agree that the community of Nineveh was guilty of theft. But how far did they go in repairing their ways and in restoring stolen property to its original owner?

Shmuel said: If they had built a stolen beam as the main support of their house, they dismantled their house to return the beam to its original owner.

This is in conflict with the view of Rabbi Yochanan, for **R. Yochanan said:** Whatever was in their hands, they returned, that which was stored in their closets and drawers, they failed to return. (Taanit 16a)

Shmuel, like the mishna in Taanit, views Nineveh as the ultimate Teshuva. His example about the central beam of a large home is not selected in a spirit of mere randomness. This scenario is taken from the halakhic lexicon in which the mishna (Gittin 5:5) teaches: "If a beam that was acquired by robbery has been built into a building, restitution may be made in money so as not to put obstacles in the way of penitents." Generally, a stolen item must be returned intact to its rightful owner; however, when its return would inflict a crushing loss upon the thief, halakha suspended the standard rule and permitted the criminal to issue a monetary payment to his victim. Why? This is "*takanat haShavim*" – a rabbinic edict to encourage penitence. Halakha assumed that if the bar of repentance would be placed too high, criminals would be deterred from repairing the wrongs they had committed.

Using this fascinating rule, Shmuel suggests that Nineveh went beyond the standard halakha. They were so thorough in their penitence that in their enthusiasm to acquit themselves of all guilt, they dismantled even their homes to return stolen items.

A SHALLOW REPENTANCE

But Rabbi Yochanan takes the opposite perspective. Basing himself on the verse (Jonah 3:8) in which the king exhorts the people to "turn from his wicked way and from the violence (*hamas*) which is **in his hands**," Rabbi Yochanan suggests that the "*hamas*" is stolen property but that the people returned only that which was "in hand" and not thievery that had been stored away from public view.

We appreciate Rabbi Yochanan's textual cue, but does Rabbi Yochanan reflect the spirit of the text? What is the source of Rabbi Yochanan cynical assessment?

An intertextual comparison may offer a first line of explanation. If we compare the king's instruction to the people's fulfillment, we identify a significant disparity:

The King says (3:7):	The people do:
Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water.	They called a fast (3:5)
man and beast must be covered with sackcloth	and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them. (3:5)
and let men call on God earnestly	-
that each may turn from his wicked way	they turned from their wicked way (3:10)
and from the violence (<i>hamas</i>) which is in his hands	-

What is missing? Yes, the people fast and don sackcloth, they "turn from their wicked way," but they fail to abandon "the violence (or the stolen goods) in his hands." So Rabbi Yochanan may justifiably conclude that the return of stolen goods was at best, partial.

A second problem relates to the swift and extreme nature of their Teshuva. We fail to recall an equivalent episode in which people repent with such speed and unbridled gusto. Notwithstanding the looming, forty-day threat of annihilation, it almost seems too extreme, too fantastic, too theatrical. We wonder: Is it genuine or merely staged? Is it a mere fad or something substantial? Furthermore, what is the strange notion that animals be denied food and drink; do animals require forgiveness?¹

¹ The Jerusalem Talmud suggests a more sinister reading of the strategy employed by the people of Nineveh:

Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Levi said: This was a deceitful repentance. What did they do? ... they placed nursing calves inside and their mothers outside, nursing donkeys inside, and the mothers outside; these [the suckling offspring] were crying from their side [from hunger] and these [the mothers] were crying from their side. They [the people of Nineveh] said [to God]: If you will not have mercy on us, we will not have mercy upon these [animals]. (Yerushalmi Taanit 2:3)

Here there is an attempt to manipulate God. The Yerushalmi is explaining the place of the animals in the city's repentance. It suggests that the helpless innocent animals were used as a means of extorting a reprieve from God. After all, why should the animals be

And so, Rabbi Yochanan suggests that at most, the people engaged in a very superficial repentance, reminiscent maybe of the way that contemporary society makes New Year's resolutions and forgets them the next day. They cleared out what was visible. Possibly they just wanted to placate their pious monarch. But a fundamental inventory was never made, and the illicit bank accounts, the goods obtained via illegal means, remained in their possession. For Rabbi Yochanan, a flurry of public energy is not equivalent to a profound change in societal norms.

INTERIM SUMMARY

We have presented two approaches to Nineveh's repentance.

Approach 1: Their Teshuva was thorough and genuine. This is Shmuel's approach as backed by the verse in Chapter 3: "When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened."

Approach 2: For Rabbi Yochanan, their repentance was superficial and cursory at best. Of course, we may wonder why God would respond to such a perfunctory Teshuva. The answer is provided by Chapter 4: Nineveh numbered "more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals." In other words, God doesn't expect too much from human beings, and as a result, even a nominal move to betterment was sufficient. This closing phrase underscores Rabbi Yochanan's point in one further way, for if the people cannot tell their right **hand** from their left, then how does the Ninevite "turn from his wicked way and from the violence (*hamas*) which is **in his hands**"? This expression reinforces the spurious nature of their Teshuva.

Of course, these two approaches clash and contradict. How are we to resolve the dissonance between them? Does the prophet Jonah relate to either of these perspectives?

denied food? This approach proposes that the Ninevites who knew of God's instinctive mercy to the innocent, essentially blackmailed God into renouncing the destruction of the city. Of course, this reading is highlighted in the final words of the book: "...and also many animals?"

JONAH'S PROTEST

Why did Jonah flee from God? Why did he initially refuse God's mission to Nineveh? Jonah reacts very angrily to God's generous forgiveness. His impassioned protest articulates the motive behind his original refusal to prophecy and flight from God:

Jonah was greatly displeased and he was grieved. 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 to Tarshish. For I know that you are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment. Please Lord, take my life, for I would rather die than live." The Lord replied, "Are you that deeply grieved?" (4:1-4)

Jonah is frustrated, deeply upset to the point of wishing his own death. Why is Jonah so disconcerted at God's compassion towards Nineveh? Shouldn't the prophet be delighted at Nineveh's repentance? Jonah's claim is that God is merciful; too merciful! In this speech, he cites God's 13 Attributes of Mercy. However, his quotation deliberately engineers a significant detail:

<u>Jonah 4:2</u>	<u>Exodus 34:6-7</u>
	O Lord! O Lord!
Gracious and compassionate God,	compassionate and gracious God,
slow to anger,	slow to anger,
Abounding in kindness,	Abounding in kindness,
renouncing punishment	And truth

Classically, God is seen as bridging the two opposite values of mercy and truth. God embodies both the Midat Ha-Rachamim (Attribute of Mercy) and its moderating counterbalance of Midat Ha-Din (Attribute of Justice). Jonah's claim is that God, in His benevolence and forgiveness, has abandoned any sense of truth. Jonah's flight from prophecy was a function of his refusal to serve as the agent of a God who exonerates sinners in such a free fashion. Jonah upholds the principle of truth;² after all, should people not be held responsible for their

² I heard this approach in a shiur by Nechama Leibowitz z"l. You can find it in Uriel Simon's commentary to Jonah: Mikra Leyisra'el: A Bible Commentary for Israel (Tel Aviv, Am Oved, 1992), pp. 7-9.

actions? Crimes should not be pardoned unless the criminal has undergone some fundamental rehabilitation.

Now, for Jonah to get this upset, we surmise that he feels deeply uncomfortable with God's actions. He posits that God has absolved Nineveh too lightly. Why? Because Jonah is suspicious of Nineveh's repentance; Nineveh hasn't changed! He leaves the city and "made a booth (sukkah) there and sat under it in the shade until he should see what happened to the city."(1:5) What is Jonah expecting to "happen to the city"?

One might suggest that he is unaware of God's decision, and that he is waiting for the fortieth day to see whether the city will be destroyed or condoned. But his emotional reaction and his outburst (4:1-2) preclude that line of thinking.

Instead, we must propose that Jonah is waiting to prove his point to God. He sits in a vigil, observing the goings on in the city, waiting for the tension to subside so that he will witness the population's return to normality and its corrupt public norms. He assumes he will see a resumption of a lifestyle riddled with the "hamas" – sin, violence, robbery – that so characterize Nineveh. Jonah seeks to show God the evidence; he wants to demonstrate to the Almighty that His mercy has been misplaced and excessive, that God's "kindness" has lost touch with reality and has thereby overwhelmed the principle of "Truth."

GOD TEACHES JONAH A LESSON

And the Lord God prepared a gourd, which grew over Jonah, to provide shade for his head, and save him from his discomfort [lit. evil³].

Jonah was exceeding happy about the gourd.

But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it attacked the gourd, so that it withered.

And when the sun arose, God prepared a strong east wind; and the sun beat upon Jonah's head, and he became faint and requested for himself that he might die, and said, "I would rather die than live."

And God said to Jonah: "Are you so deeply grieved about the gourd?" And he said: "I am greatly angry, that I want to die." (4:6-8)

³ There is an obvious play here about the "evil" felt by Jonah in comparison and contrast to the "evil" (3:10) that was threatened against Nineveh.

God prepares to show Jonah just how wrong he is. In the same manner that he sent (Heb: "vayeman") a fish to swallow Jonah and coerce him to adopt his divine mission, similarly here, God "prepares" (Heb: "vayeman") a gourd, a leafy plant, to shade Jonah. From the text, we gain the impression that this foliage provides considerable relief and pleasure to Jonah, a feature that is curious seeing that earlier Jonah had, "made a booth (sukkah) there and sat under it in the shade." Jonah doesn't require the leafy canopy of the *kikayon* (gourd); he already has shelter!

Jonah enjoys the shade of the gourd for what seems to be a single day, and nonetheless, when he experiences its loss, he is beside himself and becomes so depressed that he again expresses his wish to die.

What has God proven to Jonah with this little exercise?

And the Lord said: "You had pity upon this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?"

In other words, God is saying something like this: Jonah! You want "Truth"? You demand that humans receive only that which they deserve? Do you genuinely think that the human race is capable of a system which functions according to strict justice? Look at you! You are so fickle, so fragile; you are crushed at the loss of a plant that you received for free – you didn't earn it! You didn't even need it! Its loss has caused you the deepest distress. Look at Nineveh – 120,000 people who "who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals." Says God: I do not forgive humans because they have made amends in a pristine, thorough and absolute manner; I forgive human beings because, after all, they are merely humans:

Man is founded in dust and ends in dust.
He lays down his soul to bring home bread.
He is like broken shard,
Like grass dried up,
Like a faded flowers,
Like a fleeting shadow,
Like a passing cloud,
Like a breath of wind,
Like a whirling dust,
Like a dream that slips away. (High Holiday liturgy – Unetaneh Tokef)

And so, God proves to Jonah that if man is judged by the measure of strict justice, none of us will prevail. We try to do Teshuva, just like the people of Nineveh, but at times it is merely superficial, or short lived. And yet, God is merciful and renounces punishment. He forgives readily, even though the changes are neither thorough nor permanent. Mercy trumps Truth.

THE DUAL MESSAGE OF JONAH

When we read Jonah at Mincha on Yom Kippur, what message are we broadcasting? At first glance, we are publicizing the message of the Mishna in Taanit (above) – that Israel should follow Nineveh's lead and engage in a fundamental soul-searching and a thorough transformation. We are announcing that we have but a few short hours to return to God earnestly and completely before the gates of Yom Kippur close.

But there might be a second message; this one directed not to man but to God. We may be proposing to God that we are merely humans, "who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals." What does God really want from us? We are but flesh and blood, we make so many mistakes. We frequently fail to listen to our own moral voices, to live up to our personal self-expectations. Does God truly intend to approach us in a spirit of Justice?

If you keep account of sins, O Lord!
Lord, who will survive
Forgiveness is with You... (Psalm 130:3-4)

We read Jonah at Mincha, late in the day. We are, like Jonah, tired and faint. Many people have suggested that the restrictions of Yom Kippur - not eating and drinking or attending to other bodily functions - take us above and beyond our humanity, as we become transformed into angels, enrobed in white, above physical needs.

But I once heard a more down-to-earth explanation. By the time Mincha comes around, we are tired and sweaty, hot and hungry. We aren't angels at all; we are exposed in all the pathetic fragility of our humanity as we find it difficult to manage a mere twenty-five hours unaided. How frail we are; how delicate and human!

Possibly then, the message of Jonah is dual.

Chapter Three calls us to remove ourselves as thoroughly as we can from our "evil ways and the violence that is in our

hands" and indeed, as with Nineveh, God should see this earnest repentance and exonerate His people.

But Chapter Four calls to God, and suggests that despite all the best intentions, despite the confessions of the day, we are likely, in a short period of time, to return to a sinful path; there is a probability that people will fail to live up to their hopes and prayers for self-betterment. And so, is Yom Kippur worthless? Are our sincere Yom Kippur intentions for naught? The book of Jonah suggests that God should still grant us a reprieve. Why? – Because we fail sometimes. We can be vulnerable, delicate, frequently inconsistent, temperamental and impulsive. In short – we are human:

And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?'

Wishing a *גמר חתימה טובה* for a *שנת חיים ושלום* to you, your families, and all Israel.