



Parashat Vayelech - #250

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On the Haftarah... Yonah: The Beloved and Courageous Prophet [The Book of Yonah]

Yonah, a prophet of Hashem, received a Divine command to call for a spiritual awakening in Nineveh, the capital of the huge Kingdom of Ashur. We would think that he would be overjoyed: what an amazing opportunity to help an entire empire repent! But his response is the exact opposite.

As is known, three times a day in the prayer "Aleinu" we say: "Therefore we put our hope in You, Hashem, our G-d, that we will quickly see Your mighty splendor...to perfect the world through the Almighty's kingdom. Then all humanity will call upon Your Name." Our deepest wish is that all of humanity will find the proper path.

And yet we read: "Yonah arose to flee to Tarshish from before Hashem. He went down to Yafo and found a ship traveling to Tarshish. He paid his fare and boarded it to travel with them to Tarshish from before Hashem" (1:3). The first question which arises is: how can one flee "from before Hashem," since the earth is full of His honor? "How shall I leave from Your Spirit and where shall I flee from Your Presence?" (Tehillim 139:7). Is it really possible to run away from the Master of the Universe?

The Radak, Rabbi David Kimchi, explained that Yonah knew that one cannot flee from Hashem. This is made clear from the text itself, which does not in fact say that Yonah wanted to flee "from Hashem" but rather that he wanted to flee "from before Hashem" (Yonah 1:3). Yonah sought to distance himself from the place of prophecy, for it is only possible to receive prophecy in the Land of Israel. The Radak said that if he left the Land of Israel, the spirit of

prophecy – through which one is considered to be "before Hashem" - would not be able to rest upon him. The Land of Israel is the Land of prophecy. Our Sages were therefore surprised by the verse: "It was that the word of Hashem came to Yechezkel ben Buzi Ha-Cohain in the land of Kasdim" (Yechezkel 1:3)." How did he prophesy outside of the Land? The answer: "It was," meaning, "it already was" (Moed Katan 25a), i.e. Yechezkel began by prophesying in the Land of Israel and then continued to prophesy in the Exile.

But an additional question arises: How then did Moshe Rabbenu prophesy in the land of Egypt and in the desert? Rabbi Yehudah Halevi provides two answers to this question: 1. It is possible to prophesy not only in the Land of Israel but also about the Land of Israel, even when one is outside of the Land (Kuzari 2, 14). 2. The particular area where Moshe Rabbenu prophesied is part of the Land of Israel. There is a disagreement regarding the southern border of Israel, which is called "the River-bed of Egypt" [Nachal Mitzrayim]. It is unclear whether this refers to the Nile or to Wadi El Arish. According to the opinion of Rabbi Yehudah Halevi "the River-bed of Egypt" is the eastern offshoot of the Nile called "Pelusium" and thus the land of Goshen, where Moshe Rabbenu prophesied, is within the borders of the Land of Israel.

Regardless, Yonah was well aware that Hashem's glory fills the entire world. Therefore, according to the Radvaz, Rabbi David ben Zimra, who lived in Egypt four hundred years ago, Yonah still had not received the definite words to relate to the people, as it is written: "Call out to her" (1:2). Yes, he had been "called," but the specifics of that call were as yet lacking. Only after he was spit out of the fish was the exact prophecy revealed to him: "You should arise to Nineveh, the great city, and call out to it the announcement which I tell you" (3:2). The Radvaz brought a proof from Targum Yonatan (the Aramaic translation) which explains the verse, "And Yonah arose to flee to the sea before he prophesied," i.e. before he received the prophecy (Shut Ha-Radvaz vol. 2 #842).

This brings us back to our original question: What did Yonah see that made him refuse to fulfill the Divine order? Rashi explained that Yonah said: The non-Jews are close to repentance (Yonah 1:3) – i.e. they repent easily. The Nation of Israel, however, is not close to repentance. They are stiff-necked. The Nation of Israel had a myriad of prophets. Our Rabbis relate that there were forty-eight prophets and eight prophetesses, and those were in addition to the hundreds and thousands of prophets who did not leave any writings (Megillah 14a). There were so many prophets, and yet the Nation of Israel did not always heed their call. The non-Jews, in contrast, repent quickly. We see this clearly when Yonah, without exhibiting any desire or passion, arrives to the city and says: "Another forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (Yonah 3:4). He says the absolute minimum possible, and yet they begin repenting immediately! So Yonah reasoned: if I help the non-Jews repent, the Nation of Israel (who will not heed the call) will be judged harshly. I do not want to be part of this process.

There is, in truth, a very important question here: why do the non-Jews repent so quickly, while we, the treasured and holy Nation, are stiff-necked and do not listen to the prophets? The answer is that the non-Jews repent quickly, but they also return to their old-ways quickly. Their repentance is not whole hearted. It is true that the people of Nineveh repented: the king, the citizens and even the animals fasted and put on sackcloth and ashes. But it is also true that they returned to their sinful ways with the same alacrity. The proof of this is that we

have never heard that the city of Nineveh became a city of righteous people. The opposite is true: Nineveh was the capital of Sancheriv, whose men destroyed the Kingdom of Israel and exiled the Ten Tribes who have disappeared to this very day. We have heard that they waged difficult and cruel wars. Their repentance was not sincere or true. In contrast, although the Nation of Israel is stiff-necked, when they do repent, their repentance is true and not merely an act of momentary excitement. The Maharal – Rabbi Yehudah Loew – explained that this character trait flows from the fact that the Nation of Israel examines every matter based on intellect. Because the Nation of Israel argues over every issue and is not easily convinced, it is difficult to get them to repent (Netzach Yisrael, chapter 14). The Nation of Israel is not easily moved because it is an intellectual Nation. We see this already during the period of Moshe Rabbenu when the Nation of Israel argued with him constantly: "Were there no graves in Egypt that you took us to die in the desert?" (Shemot 14:11). They even tried to understand revealed miracles in various ways. This is not a fundamentally negative trait; on the contrary, it testifies to their seriousness, depth, and intellectual search for truth. The non-Jewish Nations, on the other hand, are more grounded in the physical rather than the intellectual world. They are like a material which easily changes its form. Thus, Yonah refused to help the people of Nineveh repent so that their repentance would not be used as an accusation against the Nation of Israel.

Yonah loved Israel passionately and had a good role model for his actions: Moshe Rabbenu. The sin of the Golden Calf was a horrible sin which our Sages compare to "a bride who engaged in extramarital relations during the wedding" (Shabbat 88b). In the midst of Hashem's revelation on Mt. Sinai, Moshe went up to receive the Torah. When he descended, the Jewish People were dancing around the Golden Calf. The Master of the Universe informed him: "Leave Me alone, so that My anger will flare up at them and I may consume them, and I will make you a great nation" (Shemot 32:10). Hashem promised to create a new nation from Moshe Rabbenu, with no need for those who are dancing around the Golden Calf. But Moshe replied: No! And if You do not forgive them "erase me from the book which You have written" (ibid. verse 32). Moshe Rabbenu said: I do not want to be a great nation. I only want this Nation as it is. Moshe Rabbenu displayed enormous self-sacrifice when he, so to speak, gave an ultimatum to Hashem: either you forgive this Nation or "erase me from the book which You have written." In the end, the Master of the Universe forgave them. Yonah followed in Moshe Rabbenu's footsteps. Our Sages summarize this idea in one brief statement: "Yonah demanded the honor of the son" (Mechilta De-Rabbi Yishmael, Bo, parashah #1). Yonah demanded the honor of the son, i.e. the Nation of Israel. For Israel's sake, he was willing to do anything, even to distance himself from the Master of the Universe.

But, in the end, of course Hashem was correct. In His great mercy, He was willing to accept even partial Teshuvah. If only Nineveh would take a small step towards repentance and Hashem, even a fleeting one, Hashem would cancel the harsh punishment which He had planned. Yonah learned this idea when he was in the belly of the fish. He repented, and then agreed to fulfill his mission in Nineveh.

We will conclude with an interesting historical note. A researcher named Olders wrote that in the year 5487 a whale was caught with the aid of a harpoon in the Falkland Islands, off the coast of South America. The whale began to move around in a frenzy, flipped over the fishing boat and swallowed one of the sailors. The sailor was found unconscious inside the whale three days later. They succeeded in reviving him, but he suffered severe psychological

damage from this experience for the rest of his life, and was never able to recover. He survived because he was not in the digestive system of the whale, since its opening is too narrow to pass a full-grown man, but rather in its respiratory system. The man was thus able to breathe and did not suffocate. Nonetheless, he was obviously in an extremely stressful situation. In contrast, when Yonah left the fish, he was completely revived! He helped the sinners return to Hashem, and taught a universal lesson which applies for all nations and all times.

Rav Aviner on... They're "Head Tefillin" and Not "Forehead Tefillin"

[Be-Ahavah U-Be-Emunah – Nitzvaim 5772 – translated by R. Blumberg]

Kitzur Shulchan Aruch (10:3) teaches:

“As for the Torah’s dictum that the head Tefillin must be ‘between your eyes’ (Devarim 6:8), our Sages had a tradition that this does not mean ‘between the eyes’ literally, but corresponds to the spot between one’s eyes. The real spot starts at the hairline and stretches upward to the end of the soft-spot in an infant’s skull, which means that the lower edge of the head Tefillin should not be lower than the place where the hair begins to grow, and the upper edge not higher than the place where a child’s skull is soft. Great care should be taken to watch that the head Tefillin always lay in their proper place. Even if only a small part of those Tefillin are on the forehead where no hair grows, or if it inclines to the side and it is not exactly midway between the eyes, the precept is not fulfilled, and the blessing is pronounced in vain.”

Indeed one must place one’s head Tefillin where the hair starts to grow. If someone has bangs and he places the Tefillin on those bangs, it does not help. A lot of people wear their Tefillin too low. The “Chayei Adam” (Klal 14, Se’if 10) said that if someone places part of his head Tefillin on his forehead, he is adopting the approach of the Karaites.

In the booklet “Nefesh David” (Letter 15), The “Aderet”, the illustrious Rabbi Eliyahu David Rabinowitz-Te’omim, Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem and father-in-law of Ha-Rav Avraham Yitzchak Ha-Cohain Kook, wrote as follows:

“I have toiled hard to rectify the way the mitzvah of Tefillin is practiced, so that the head Tefillin should be set in their proper place. I have given many talks about this, and I have written flyers to be put up in the study houses and Shuls.”

Maran Ha-Rav Kook likewise wrote a short book about this called “Chevesh Pe’er” [Wearing Majesty], and he went from city to city encouraging people to recognize the importance of this topic.

The book “Shivchei Ha-Re’iyah” relates that Rav Kook, as is well-known, was nearsighted. He would customarily remark that this attribute was literally heaven-sent. He would then explain that some people do not place their head Tefillin in the right place during services. Were he able to see this, it would greatly disturb his own prayers.

The Chafetz Chaim wrote in his Mishna Berurah (27:33): “Many fall prey to this prohibition and erroneously say that the top edge of the Tefillin starts above the hairline, whereas the bulk of the head Tefillin lies on the forehead. They thereby violate a Torah prohibition, for one’s entire head Tefillin must be placed above the hairline. Even the bottom edge of the head Tefillin must lie above the hairline. As far as someone with bangs coming halfway down his forehead placing his head Tefillin over them, that is no better, because the bottom of the head Tefillin must still be the hairline, and it is better for it to be a little bit above that as well. After all, there is room on one’s head to put *two* head Tefillins!

Placing the Tefillin slightly above safeguards against its slipping down to the forehead. Whoever places his head Tefillin on his forehead is following the Karaite practice, and does not fulfill the Mitzvah. The scrupulously Torah-observant should warn their friends and teach them not to fall prey to this. Otherwise, those friends could be classed as 'Jews who sin with

their bodies' (Rosh Hashanah 17a) by having 'Skulls that have never had Tefillin on them' (ibid.).

Their blessing over Tefillin is likewise in vain, for Tefillin set in the wrong place are the equivalent of Tefillin still in their bag.”

Likewise, the straps get tugged during the service, causing the Tefillin to descend from their proper place, and the Tefillin should be readjusted.

If someone is totally bald, where does he put his Tefillin? He should hold on to pictures from his youth or when he started to go bald, and he should ascertain the precise location of his original hairline.

[From my commentary on the Kitzur Shulchan Aruch]

Shut She'eilat Shlomo - Questions of Jewish Law

Laws of Mourning

Mourning for a secular Israeli

Q: Does one sit shiva for a secular Israeli?

A: It is true that we do not sit shiva for one who separates himself from the ways of the community (Rambam, Hilchot Avel 1:10 and Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 345:5). The Rambam says (ibid.) that people who separate themselves from the community are "The people who cast off the yoke of the mitzvot from their necks and are not included among the community of Israel." And the Shulchan Aruch writes (ibid.): "They are like free people for themselves like the rest of the nations." This means that they are people who left the Nation of Israel, and one who leaves defines himself as an outsider. But Maran Ha-Rav Kook makes an important clarification in his article "Al Bamotenu Chalalim" (Ma'amrei Ha-Re'eiyah, p. 89). He discusses the exact same question about shiva for two members of the secular movement "Ha-Shomer" who were killed in the Galil. Maran Ha-Rav Kook said that secular Jews are not defined as those who separate themselves from the ways of the community. The separation which appears in the Rambam and the Shulchan Aruch is comprised of two parts: separation from Judaism and separation from the Nation of Israel. In the past, one went with the other: if one left the religion he also left the Nation, and he was thus "outside". Maran Ha-Rav Kook says that today this is not so. Some people leave the religion but do not leave their connection to the Nation of Israel, and they display enormous self-sacrifice for the Nation, and are sometimes even killed for the Nation, as were the members of the "Ha-Shomer" movement. Therefore, this law does not apply to them. As is known, in the language of Halachah, they are like a "Tinok She-Nishba" (literally a Jewish child captured and raised among non-Jews). The Rambam explains in Hilchot Mamrim (3:3) that a "Tinok She-Nishba" is a Jew who did not receive a proper Jewish upbringing and education. In simple words, they are confused. They do not separate themselves from the religion in order to destroy the Nation of Israel. They separate themselves because they do not know any better. The great authorities already ruled that these difficult halachot do not apply to secular Jews in our days, since they are "Tinokot She-Nishbu." This is also the opinion of the Chareidi authorities. For example, Nitei Gavriel (Hilchot Aveilut) quotes the Chareidi authorities who rule that we do sit shiva for a "Tinok She-Nishba" – a category which today includes secular Israelis.

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