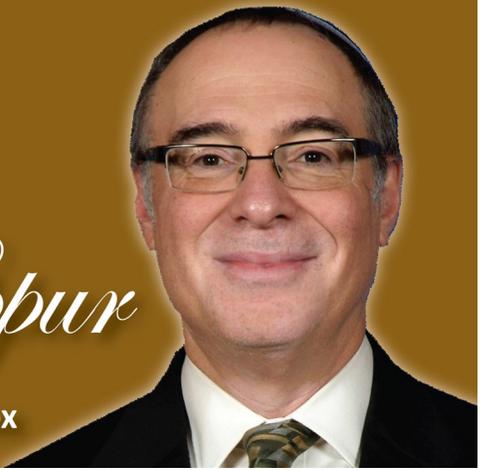




Thoughts on Yom Kippur

by Rabbi Bernie Fox



Yom Kippur 5775 - October 2, 2014

The Prophet who Defied G-d

The word of Hashem came to Yonah the son of Amittai, saying: Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim against it; for their wickedness is come up before Me. Yonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of Hashem; and he went down to Yaffo, and found a ship coming to Tarshish. He paid the fare for it. He went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, from the presence of Hashem. (Sefer Yonah 1:1-3)

1. Yonah's flight from before Hashem

Sefer Yona delivers an account of Yonah's mission to the people of Nineveh. He is directed by Hashem to warn the people of this non-Jewish nation, that Hashem is prepared to destroy them because of their wickedness. Yonah initially resists this mission but eventually relents. He delivers Hashem's message to the citizens of Nineveh. They respond to Yonah's message by repenting. The destruction of Nineveh is averted. However, Yonah is not pleased with this outcome. He is disappointed that Nineveh is spared. In the closing chapter of the book, Hashem provides Yonah with a revelation that addresses Yonah's anguish.

One of the most troublesome elements of the narrative is Yonah's initial refusal to carry out the mission to which Hashem appoints him. There are two questions that arise from Yonah's response. The first question to be considered is why was Yonah opposed to warning the people of Nineveh? One of the functions of a prophet is to rebuke the people and to urge them to be faithful to Hashem. Yonah was a prophet. He must have rebuked Bnai Yisrael many times during his tenure as a prophet of the nation. Yet, initially, he refused to warn the people of Nineveh of their forthcoming demise. Why did Yonah object to this assignment?

There are number of responses suggested to this question. Malbim and others suggest that Yonah understood that Nineveh was the capital of an emerging political and military power. He also foresaw that this state would be an adversary of the Jewish people. He concluded that the destruction of Nineveh would benefit Bnai Yisrael. Therefore, he was reluctant to rescue a likely enemy of his own people.¹

A similar answer is suggested by the Talmud and quoted widely among the commentators. Yonah strongly suspected that the people of Nineveh would indeed repent in response to his forecast of doom. This would starkly contrast with the response of the Jewish people to the many prophets

¹ Rav Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michel (Malbim), *Nachalat Yehoshua – Commentary on Sefer Yonah 1:2*.

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that Hashem had sent to them. Despite the urgings of its prophets, the Jewish people had not repented. Yonah feared that the contrast between Bnai Yisrael's stubborn adherence to its wickedness and the immediate repentance of the people of Nineveh would render his people even more liable for their behavior. He did not want to bring further shame upon his people and magnify their failings.²

And he prayed to Hashem, and said: I pray You, Hashem, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my own country? Therefore I fled beforehand to Tarshish; for I knew that You are a gracious G-d, and compassionate, long-suffering, and abundant in mercy, and You repent from the evil. (Sefer Yonah 4:2)

2. Yonah believes Hashem is too merciful

Neither of these explanations for Yonah's resistance is clearly stated in the text. In fact, the narrative describes Yonah's initial refusal to accept his mission without providing any explanation for Yonah's behavior. However, in the final chapter of the sefer, Yonah himself provides a very disturbing explanation for his attitude. He has delivered his warning to the people of Nineveh; they have repented. Hashem has spared them. Yonah says to Hashem that this is the outcome that he had feared from the moment he was assigned his mission. He understood that Hashem is merciful and forgiving. He anticipated that the people would repent and Hashem would spare them.

This is a remarkable complaint. Do we not benefit from Hashem's mercy and forbearance? We all sin and at times we act wickedly. Because Hashem is merciful and forgives us, we are spared from destruction and from the consequences we deserve. How can Yonah criticize Hashem's mercy?

Yonah was not objecting to Hashem's mercy. However, he believed that there is a point at which a wicked person has forfeited the right to be forgiven. He argued that at some point a person has been afforded adequate opportunity to repent his sins and to abandon his evil ways. If this point is passed and the person has not been moved to repent, then the person should be punished. Yonah was convinced that the people of Nineveh had passed this point. Their opportunity to repent and to be forgiven had passed. They did not deserve this last opportunity. They deserved to be punished.³

And he came there to a cave, and lodged there; and, behold, the word of the L-rd came to him, and He said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" And he said, "I have been very zealous for Hashem the L-rd of hosts: for the children of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and slain your prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." (Melachim 1 19:8-9)

3. Yonah refused to obey Hashem

Yonah's response to Hashem's instructions raises a second issue. Yonah had reason for questioning and resisting the mission Hashem assigned to him. However, we expect a prophet to surrender to the will of Hashem. Every person is required to observe the commandments of the Torah. Some of these commandments we do not understand. Some are beyond the realm of human comprehension. Despite our inability to comprehend the rationale of some of the commandments of the Torah, we observe them. Yonah received a personal commandment from Hashem. He was instructed to travel to Nineveh and warn the people of their impending doom. He did not understand and objected to the commandment. He should have suspended his own judgment, and submitted himself to the will of Hashem.

² Michilta, Parshat Bo, Introduction.

³ Rav Ari Ginsberg (http://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/797608/Rabbi_Ari_Ginsberg/Yonah_-_Escaping_from_Hashem) develops more thoroughly Yonah's outlook. He notes that Maimonides explains in chapter 5 of his Laws of Repentance that repentance is not a right guaranteed to a person. Instead, it is a privilege. In some instances, Hashem does deprive a person of this privilege. The Torah describes Hashem hardening the heart of Paroh. This phrase means that Hashem deprived Paroh of the capacity to exercise his free will and chose to repent his sins. Hashem hardened Paroh's heart in response to his prolonged and stubborn wickedness. According to Maimonides, Hashem suspended Paroh's capacity to repent in order that he should receive the punishment he deserved. Maimonides provides other examples, from the Torah, in which Hashem suspended free will in order that a wicked person should receive the punishment deserved.

Rav Ginsberg explains that Yonah understood the phenomenon described by Maimonides. Yonah believed that the people of Nineveh deserved the same fate as Paroh and the Egyptians. They should not be given further opportunity to repent. Instead, they should be destroyed for their sins.

An interesting aspect of Maimonides' position is that Hashem never ignores a person's repentance. Regardless of the degree and extent of one's wickedness, if that person repents, he is saved from punishment. Therefore, when a person has exhausted Hashem's mercy and must be punished, his capacity to repent is suspended. He cannot repent and he receives the punishment that he deserves.

Furthermore, this is not the only instance in which a prophet declined a mission assigned to him by Hashem. The prophet Elijah – Eliyahu – declined to fulfill the mission assigned to him by Hashem. In the above passages, Eliyahu tells Hashem that he has acted zealously on behalf of Hashem. The people have rejected the messages of the prophets that Hashem has sent to them. Rather than heeding their rebukes and warnings they have pursued, persecuted, and even murdered their prophets. Eliyahu does not want to continue to serve as prophet to the nation. They do not deserve continued warnings and opportunities to repent.

Eliyahu's objection is similar to Yonah's. He cannot understand Hashem's mercy. Is there not a point at which evil must be punished? Where is Hashem's justice? However, Eliyahu's behavior raises the same problem as Yonah's. Why did Eliyahu not submit to Hashem's will? We should not expect to fully understand Hashem's will. We must be obedient and serve Hashem even when we do not understand his commandments.

In summary, both Eliyahu and Yonah resisted the missions assigned to them by Hashem. Both were prophets. They were individuals of remarkable wisdom, humility, and virtue. Yet, somehow these exceptional individuals could not surrender to the will of Hashem and perform His commandments to them. How can we understand their behavior?

4. A prophet must be more than obedient

Perhaps, the answer lies in reconsidering the analogy between the commandments of the Torah and the personal assignment given to the prophet. The commandments of the Torah demand our obedience. Because observance of these commandments is an expression of obedience to Hashem, our performance is not compromised by our inability to understand the rationale underlying a commandment. In fact, obedience is an act of submission and surrender. In order to surrender to the authority of the Torah, we need not understand the rationale of its commandments.

Apparently, the prophet cannot discharge his mission simply through obedience. He must embrace and integrate into his outlook the mission that is assigned to him. Each personal commandment that is assigned to him is both a directive and a revelation. He cannot be obedient to the directive, but untouched by the revelation. The revelation aspect must shape his outlook and his understanding of Hashem. In a sense, the prophet is required to partner with Hashem. He must embrace his mission and feel personally compelled by it. Hashem demands more from the prophet than obedience. He demands that he conform his thinking and outlook to the revealed truth of his mission.⁴

Now, Yonah's and Eliyahu's behaviors can be reinterpreted. They were not refusing to perform their missions. They were responding to their inability to integrate them into their outlook and thinking. Without this integration, they could not discharge their missions. In other words, neither refused to perform his mission. Each expressed his lack of capacity, his inability to understand his mission. Without this understanding the prophet cannot proceed.

5. Sefer Yonah's theme and Yom Kippur

Various explanations are offered for reading the story of Yonah on Yom Kippur. The variety and number of plausible explanations is understandable. Sefer Yonah deals extensively with the themes of teshuvah and mechilah – repentance and forgiveness. These themes are central to our observance of Yom Kippur. The lessons communicated by the story of Yonah provide us a deeper appreciation and understanding of these themes and the day.

On Yom Kippur we appeal to Hashem for His mercy. We ask that he accept our repentance and forgive us for our sins and wrongdoings. We might feel that we are entitled to repent from our sins and to be forgiven by Hashem. The story of Yonah reveals that there is no simple explanation for Hashem's mercy and His acceptance of our repentance. Yonah could not understand the secret of Hashem's mercy and we should not assume that we have penetrated this mystery. Certainly, we should recognize that the opportunity to repent and to secure atonement is not an entitlement.

⁴ This explanation of Yona's and Eliyahu's behavior is similar to Rav Yisrael Chait's comments on this issue. (TTL catalogue # Sefer Yona N-042 and 043)



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