

Please, Be Compassionate

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What are we to make of Yonah? The story of Yonah, read on the afternoon of Yom Kippur, is complex, cryptic, and an overall baffling experience. We are faced with a prophet who attempts to reject his mission from God to the city of Ninveh, someone who experiences a most unique miracle and still expresses a severe distaste to that which the Creator has assigned to him.

The events of the fourth chapter highlight this challenge of comprehension. After Yonah's prayer from within the fish, he is released and moves forward with completing the prophetic duty assigned to him by God. The people of Ninveh appear to respond to Yonah's pleas, as the third chapter comes to a close. The fourth chapter begins with Yonah pleading with God (Yonah 4:1-3):

“Now it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was grieved. And he prayed to the Lord and said, ‘Please, O Lord, was this not my contention while I was still on my land? For this reason I had hastened to flee to Tarshish, for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, with much kindness, and relenting of evil. And now, O Lord, take now my soul from me, for my death is better than my life.’”

Even after the entire incident with the fish, Yonah still expresses a tremendous amount of dissatisfaction with the nature of his mission, to the point where he wants God to kill him. God responds with a semi-rhetorical question: “are you really upset?”

At this point, the scene shifts to introduce one of the most well-known analogies in the entire Tanach. Yonah moves to outside the city, and builds himself a hut. God encourages the growth of a *kikayon*, a type of tree, and Yonah celebrates the new and welcome shade. A worm is dispatched to kill this tree, the tree dies, and with a scorching wind brought about through Divine Intervention, Yonah begins suffering from what can only be described as heatstroke. He once again pleads for his death.

God responds (ibid 9-11):

*“And God said to Jonah; Are you very grieved about the kikayon? And he said, “I am very grieved even to death. And the Lord said: You took pity (**chasta**) on the*

kikayon, for which you did not toil nor did you make it grow, which one night came into being and the next night perished. Now should I not take pity (achos) on Nineveh, the great city, in which there are many more than one hundred twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well?"

This exchange between God and Yonah, the last verses of the Book, are perplexing on many different levels. The most obvious problem is the very nature of the analogy itself. How is Yonah's reaction to the loss of the tree comparable to God's potential compassion on the people of Ninveh?

Why was this lesson lost on Yonah? Why go through the entire effort of this tree when the message could be delivered in a more straightforward manner? If the people of Ninveh were deserving of punishment, then God would punish them, and if not, then God would withhold; after all, God's justice is perfect. What was so irreconcilable to Yonah?

The first step in comprehending this sequence requires empathizing the sense of the tremendous struggle Yonah faced. Yonah was a prophet, which reflected a state of perfection and wisdom rarely seen among the Jewish people. As a prophet, a world of knowledge about God was open to him.

Alongside this opportunity, he would receive responsibilities and missions per God's request. Prophets are tasked with a litany of different missions, more often than not delivering a message from God focused on admonition or inspiration for repentance.

The prophet is there to aid the Jewish people, to repair a serious defect or strengthen the relationship with God. Yonah was tasked with something that was beyond any normative mission. He had to inspire the people of Ninveh to repent, the very people who were on a trajectory to bring about the destruction of the Jewish people (as noted by the Sages).

The challenge of Yonah's mission is impossible for us to identify with. As a prophet, Yonah struggled with this mission, as it flew in the face of the apparent *raison d'être* for the very purpose of his role.

Even after the process of repentance, it is clear he was not able to overcome the dissonance in his mission and in his role. In one sense, Yonah was intrinsically tied to his role of prophet, unable to see any rational reason for the saving of the people of

Ninveh. His initial prayer at the start of the chapter expresses this very conflict – how does the idea of God’s mercy fit within the scope of his mission?

God chooses to use the analogy of the *kikayon* to convey a specific message. We see this in the use of the word “*chas*”, loosely translated as compassion, introduced here for the first time to Yonah. It could be that God was attempting to teach Yonah something unique about His relationship to mankind.

When discussing the analogy, the commentators weigh in with unique interpretations about the rationale for the compassion exhibited towards Ninveh.

According to the Sforno, the loss of Ninveh would be catastrophic for the surrounding region, as the city was an important center both politically and economically.

The Malbim explains that God’s compassion was directed towards those in Ninveh who were never involved with idolatry – why should they be destroyed?

The Radak surmises that God’s argument for compassion concerned the overall importance of His created beings. All of His works reflect God’s greatness, and man sits atop as the greatest of all His creations. Destroying Ninveh would be a challenge to His honor.

We see a range of different answers being given, each attempting to pinpoint the focus of God’s compassion. What is the underlying idea that ties them together?

The new concept God was teaching Yonah is the idea of His compassion, in contrast to the “normative” idea of God’s mercy. The idea of mercy, or *rachamim*, is predicated on a person committing a sin and deserving a punishment. Rather than act in a manner of pure justice, known as *din*, God acts in a forgiving and merciful way.

A perfect example lies with the sin of the Golden Calf. From a justice standpoint, the nation deserved to be annihilated. Moshe prays for forgiveness, and God has mercy on the Jewish people.

The answers concerning Ninveh offered by the various commentators point to a different concept. Each of the reasons can be considered “secondary” in nature. Whether it be the consequence to neighboring cities or taking into account those not involved with idolatry, the core issue of the (former) evil people of Ninveh is being set aside. The episode with the *kikayon*, and Yonah’s attitude concerning its growth and subsequent demise, personifies this idea.

A tree has a myriad of functions, ranging from giving fruit (if it is fruit bearing) to providing oxygen to being part of a greater ecosystem. However, man tends to identify that which surrounds him by assigning to it that utility most beneficial to him. When the tree grew, Yonah saw a shade-producing tree, and nothing more.

As the verse states, he exuded tremendous joy at this outcome. We act this way towards just about anything we make use of in this world. We see the direct benefit to us, and never normally contemplate the greater role and ramifications of whatever entity we forge a beneficial relationship with.

This should not necessarily be viewed as a criticism; rather, it is the normative way we think. In a similar fashion, Yonah was unable to see the situation in Ninveh in any other context other than the causal chain from their repentance to the future destruction of the Jewish people. He could only see the situation through the lens of a prophet, fixated on the centrality of his mission.

To consider the myriad secondary reasons for keeping Ninveh around was outside his current world purview. God points this out to him through the *kikayon*. Yonah had nothing to do with the growth of the *kikayon*. He had no consideration of the *kikayon* outside of the specific benefit it was providing to him. God's infinite knowledge and His consideration of His relationship to man is a different concept altogether.

God's use of compassion refers to taking into account a myriad of other variables and factors when deciding to act. It is different than the traditional idea of mercy, as it does not involve a shift in plan, from *din* to *rachamim*. Compassion means looking beyond the inherent flaw or issue and taking into account other tributaries that might flow from the decision. Yonah needed to appreciate this idea, requiring him to break away from his purity of vision as a prophet to assessing the situation in a more total manner.

Our focus throughout the period of the Ten Days of Repentance tends to be God's mercy. Throughout our *tefila*, we see ourselves as sinners, and cry out to God for forgiveness; after all, we are deserving of punishment.

However, the idea in Yonah extends beyond the common notion of His mercy. We beseech God to be compassionate, to take into account other factors that go beyond the strict conception of sin and its consequence. We hope that God will take this into account as well, that even if we are deserving of punishment, God will spare us for reasons like His honor. The story of Yonah offers another avenue of hope for us as we tremble before God this coming week.