

THE BOOK OF

JONAH

GOD'S PROVIDENCE
and KINDNESS, *and*
HUMAN INTELLIGENCE

Rabbi Israel Chait

TRANSCRIBED & EDITED BY STUDENTS

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Jonah is a very interesting prophet; one who can perhaps provide the most insight into what a prophet is. It is a very short book, but it is an amazing story. An analysis will yield a tremendous amount of knowledge of the prophet. The purpose of the prophet is to teach us one thing: how to properly relate to God. Most religions think this is a very simple matter. Torah does not think so, but teaches that it requires much study and knowledge; the only way we can approach God, even though we are not prophets.

The interesting story, as you know, is where Jonah receives a prophecy and then “flees” from God; he runs away from his prophecy. He rents a ship to embark on a sea voyage. Then there's a squall, and the ship is about to be scuttled. He tells the sailors, “Throw me into the sea.” He is then swallowed by a large fish, not a whale, (Torah says it is a large fish). Then he continues on his mission and eventually God puts him in a situation where he encounters a Kikayon, a castor oil plant. It grows out of the ground, protects him from the heat, and then it dies. That serves as a parable, and that is the end of the story.

I would break up the story into seven components. The first is where he runs away. The second is where he is thrown overboard. The third is where he is swallowed by the fish. The fourth is where he continues on his mission. The fifth where the Kikayon grows. The sixth is where the Kikayon dies. Then eventually, the seventh, is where his dilemma is resolved.

Now, in these seven steps, two immediately seem problematic. First of all, what is this idea of running away from God? We know that if running from God was something evil, the prophet [the sefer] knows how to condemn somebody as acting evil. That's the job of the prophet: to teach us what is good and what is evil. The prophet doesn't spare any words when it comes to identifying evil. He doesn't spare any people. King David was God's Messiah: when he did something wrong, the prophet tells him this is wrong, this is evil. Here, we find very interestingly that even though Jonah ran away from God, which you would think would be a terrible thing, the prophet doesn't say he did anything wrong. As a

matter of fact, things seem to be going in his favor. He is miraculously swallowed by this giant fish and somehow or other, eventually he is completely returned to his original state of prophecy and his relationship with God.

The second thing in the story that seems to be difficult is in terms of sequence. Jonah is swallowed by this large fish and then he continues on his mission. You would think that should be the end of the story: he is swallowed by the fish but he continues on his mission. But we notice that when he continues on his mission, he's very unhappy about it. What happens is that God causes this Kikayon to grow and shade him. Then God tells him, "You feel bad about the loss of the this Kikayon when it dies. How am I not to feel sorry about this entire city of Ninvei?"

When the fish swallows Jonah he continues, but he still has the same gripe. If he still has the same gripe, what changed? Why does he continue? Why did he not continue before? God spoke the first time and he didn't want to go on his mission. Fine, he decided not to go. Why is it that after the fish swallows him and then spews him out on the shore, that Jonah then decides to follow God's command, but he still has the same gripe? It would seem this is the same situation as at first. How does the fact that the fish swallowed him change the situation and cause him to decide differently?

Now, the idea that a person can run away from God really is a very immature idea. Everyone knows you can't run away from God. Even children are aware of this. Our Mesorah—the rabbis of the Talmud—teach that a prophet is by no means a simplistic individual. On the contrary, the Talmud teaches that prophecy falls upon a person only if he is wise, intelligent, with tremendous control over his instinctual makeup.

As Maimonides states in the seventh chapter of the Fundamentals of Torah, the prophet never experiences a situation where his instinctual nature overpowers him. One who acts instinctually is not on a level of

prophecy. The prophet is an individual who is constantly monitoring his activities, monitoring his internal life and always controls himself, but not through the medium of self-control. Everyone possesses the emotional strength to exert self-control, but the prophet's self-control is expressed through knowledge (Maimonides). It's a different kind of self-control. The prophet is a different kind of a person. The problem that we have often times is that we think these people are just like us. They are like us, but then again, they are not like us, because they've reached a different level. They are not supernatural, but they are functioning in a different way. The way the prophet functions is via his realization that if he should follow his instinctual path, it will result in harm. Man would like to rob, steal, and to acquire more money, but that's wrong. That is a kind of self-control, but it is based on ignorance. The prophet understands why that it is not good. He has knowledge and is not drawn into the emotion. He does not make a mistake. With ordinary people, and their self-control, a person makes a mistake thinking something evil is really a good value, they say, "Why did he get away with that?" But if that person is evil [the one who stole] he didn't get away with anything because what he did is very harmful to himself.

Maimonides says the prophet must possess a wide breadth of knowledge, and interestingly, he must be healthy. When he enters into the area of knowledge that deals with God (i.e., metaphysics) he is drawn into it and everything in the world seems to him as vain and not worth the energy. That is the level of the prophet. Now an individual on such a level obviously does not run away from God. This is a person with a tremendous amount of knowledge of God to the degree attainable by a human being; he possesses knowledge of himself, and knowledge of morality.

This is in contradistinction to the false prophet who is the opposite of the real prophet. In studying the true prophet, one identifies the false prophet and vice versa.

There is something interesting about the false prophet. Maimonides explains that prophecy is something of which there are two types: there are two types of prophets. Maimonides says "The prophet can receive

prophecy for himself alone in order to expand his mind, to give him more knowledge of something that he did not know before, that's one type of prophet. The second type of prophecy is when he is sent on a mission."

These two types of prophecies seem completely diverse. One benefits the prophet himself to increase his knowledge, and the other directs the prophet on a mission. In order to become a prophet a person must be on a high level. An individual who is not on that level, of course, would never be taken seriously as any kind of a prophet.

When the prophet appears to the people, coming before the Sanhedrin he does not perform any miracles, Sanhedrin asks him to make such detailed predictions that cannot be guessed by chance. This must be done repeatedly, so that over a long period of time he has made countless predictions with tremendous detail, and every detail comes true. If one detail fails he is considered a false prophet and punishable with death.

The Torah's false prophet is not just someone who makes unrealized predictions, but he is also one who preaches Torah violations, or even tells you to follow Torah but nevertheless his predictions fail to come true. The question of course is, what is the sin of a false prophet? Is it his instruction on Torah violations? This cannot be, for even in the case where he supports Torah, he can be a false prophet. Thus, his status as a false prophet is due to his failed predictions. If in his predictions—the elaborate tests which the Sanhedrin set before him, he should fail—he is considered a false prophet. It would seem that the definition of false prophet is someone who wants to give the appearance of being a prophet when he really is not. Can we then define the false prophet as an individual who pretends to be a prophet? That definition doesn't work either. For if one claims that God came to him in a vision and taught him unbelievable ideas, and even if scientists claim his ideas are astonishing, Sanhedrin proceeds with the tests of his predictions. If the details don't come true he is not considered punishable as a false prophet. Thus, even though he would be pretending to be a prophet, that is not a definition of a false prophet. For the chapter where the Torah speaks of the false prophet says

that "He commanded you to do something." To be clear, if the prophet claimed that he received knowledge which God revealed to him, and that he is thereby a prophet, and he turned out to be false [through failed predictions] he is not punishable as a false prophet. He is only punishable if he instructs others to perform some action. Even if he says to uphold Torah, and his predictions fail, he still is punishable.

Torah shares an unbelievable psychological insight. It recognizes the profile of an individual who wishes to expand his ego through exercising control over others. Therefore, the Torah distinguishes between one kind of prophet that says he is on a mission, and one who doesn't. One person may say "I had a vision; see how intelligent I am." This is an ego issue. But then there is another individual who is fraught with a certain desire to lure others to get involved in a mission. That kind of psychological personality is the false prophet, and that's why he must relate to a mission. The Torah knows human psychology of the harmful individual who cannot be tolerated in a society. His prophecy of the mission is a completely different kind of prophecy than the prophecy of simply increased knowledge.

We see there are two kinds of prophets. Obviously, one person can partake of both models. It would appear that the individual with a mission will also have the other kind of prophecy where his knowledge is expanded. So, such an individual—and certainly a true prophet—would not be a person that runs away from God. How then do we understand Jonah?

The Hebrew text is interesting. To run away from God would be written "MiPnei HaElokim." But the Navi does not use those words. Every time in Jonah it says "MiLifnei," "from before God's presence." This is found in Beraishis when Cain went away from before God. What does this mean?

There's a difference between running away from God and running away from "before" God. Running away from God is an immature idea. "From before God" means running away from a relationship with God; running away from being in God's presence. Being in God's presence means a certain relationship between the Creator and the individual.

Therefore, the Navi—when referring to Jonah—did not say he ran away from God. It says very carefully that he ran away “from before God,” because one cannot run away from God. No prophet ever thought such a thing would be possible. But running “from before God,” that something different and is possible. Running from before God means running away from His presence and from relating to God. What exactly does that mean in terms of Jonah? What did Jonah want to do? Why did he want to do it?

The answer is a very basic Torah principle: Torah places everything upon the Tzelem HaElokim, the human intellect; the part of man that perceives truth and ideas. The prophet in the act of prophecy is not a person who is simply lost. Righteous people imagine that the prophet would just prostrate himself before God. He would do anything God says. That’s the simpleton’s idea of a prophet. That’s not the Torah’s idea. The prophet never loses himself even before God. His mind is always intact.

When praying to God, Moses gave God an ultimatum: “Either you forgive the Jews or erase me from your book.” How can a person say that? The answer can be seen in Abraham. Abraham argued with God: “If there are fifty righteous people in the city, how can the Creator of the universe do such a thing?” In Torah, if the mind is not engaged, the person is not a human being anymore.

God is a teacher. God never wants man to lose his intelligence. Moses argued with God. He didn’t want to accept the mission. Jonah is not the first one in the Torah to flee from his mission. The Torah has a different concept of how we are to relate to God. We are not to relate to God in a subservient manner where we simply prostrate ourselves to Him and say we’ll do anything. That’s a fool’s attitude; not a prophet’s attitude. A prophet is an individual who relates to God in an intelligent manner.

Jonah was on a specific mission. God wanted him to go to the city of Ninvei. The Assyrians were very wicked. God wanted Jonah to warn these people and give them a chance to repent. The prophet must understand his mission. It has to make sense to him. If it doesn’t make sense to him, he is unfit for his mission. Jonah felt warning Ninvei was wrong. He felt these

people are evil. To give an exaggerated example, it would be tantamount to God telling an individual to try to save Hitler and the Nazis. What would a person’s reaction be? The person would say these people don’t deserve to be saved. They murdered millions of people. Jonah was in similar kind of position. What Jonah said to God was, “The mission is senseless.” Jonah was caught by his mind, by his understanding and by his knowledge. And a prophet can never abandon his mind. Jonah was in an unbelievable dilemma; he was in a similar dilemma as Moses was, when Moses argued with God over whether or not to accept his mission. We don’t know what all of Moses’ arguments were. We know some of them. We don’t know all of them, because he argued with God for many days. And obviously the Torah cannot convey every detail that transpired between God and the prophet because we are not on the level to understand what goes on between God and the prophet. We are not prophets. But the Torah tells us what we call Rashei Perakim, headings of things. It’s important to know such headings.

Jonah was on a high level, as Maimonides explains. Therefore, he cannot go on his mission because it does not make sense to him; prophets cannot act by rote or do something that doesn’t make sense. What does Jonah decide to do? The Torah’s lesson is amazing because it teaches us about people who are in a completely different situation than ourselves. The Torah demands studying what these people went through.

Torah never condemns Jonah for running from before God. What does “from before God” mean? It refers to God’s divine providence. When God says to the people “Make for Me a temple and I will dwell among you” this refers to the Shechinah’s dwelling [not to God]. What does it mean that God dwells? Does God live there? King Solomon said, “There is no house that can contain God. Even the heavens can’t contain God! (I Kings 8:27)” So how could a house contain God? It means to say that when this temple is built, God relates to the people with His divine providence. “Before God,” to be in God’s presence, means to be on a certain wavelength of existence where God’s divine presence affects us. The prophet represents this kind of life to the highest degree. That is God’s divine presence par excellence.

Jonah decides that he's going to remove himself from prophecy. And he knows there are two types of human existence. A person can exist under the Hashgacha—divine will—or a person can live a life of chance. The animals, for example, live a life of chance. Most human beings too, are involved in the life of chance. Unless a person has a certain knowledge, unless a person is relating to God properly, it's a big world of chance out there.

Interestingly, Jonah decides that he is trapped. He can't give up his mind and he can't follow the mission. So, what does he do? He leaves God's presence—the world of the divine providence—to live a life of chance. The Talmud says that all the prophets were wealthy. One of the requirements of a prophet is that he cannot be subservient and needy, and dependent on others. If he is dependent on other people, he is not going to be able to think properly due to other concerns. Jonah was wealthy. The Talmud derives this from the fact that he went on this trip and he paid the entire fare; he was the only passenger. Jonah fled to Tarshish to live a life of chance. Jonah went to sleep to escape the whole world of divine providence. He was starting a new life. That was his decision. Then, a severe storm brews and the captain approaches him and asks him to pray. Interestingly enough, he does not pray because he ran away from the divine providence. He said to himself that he's placing himself in the world of chance. (The ones who prayed were the sailors.)

After a while Jonah noticed the situation at sea was very unusual. He concluded that this is an act of divine providence, but specifically, an act of negative providence. He told the sailors, “It is me that God is after. Throw me into the sea and you will be removed from my ill fate.” At that point, Jonah thought that although he was subject to chance, negative divine providence was taking place and that he is deserving of death in this way. The sailors throw Jonah overboard, and a large fish swallows him. In the belly of the fish he says his prayer; praises to God. His prayer provides clues of what went on in his mind and what changes took place in Jonah:

And Jonah prayed to his God from in the belly of the fish. He said, “I cried and You heard my voice and I called forth to You from the situation of death and You heard me and You heard my voice.”

Then he makes reference to the fact that God allowed him to live through all the experiences. God heard his voice. Jonah said:

“I had said before that I was cast out from before Your eyes. But now I see I will continue to be able to look again toward Your holy temple.”

What is the holy temple? What is he saying? This verse offers a clue when Jonah says, “I said I am cast out yet I will look again toward Thy holy temple.” When he said he was cast out from before God that meant he was a living a life of chance. That was his initial thought, but then he saw that this fish swallowed him. There is an amazing idea here. The Talmud tells us that this fish was not a normal fish. It was not a whale because a human being cannot live inside a whale. What it was, the Talmud says, is that God appointed this fish. That means it was appointed from the day of creation: it was programmed into Creation itself and it was a unique phenomenon, an aberration.

The rabbis do not prefer miracles, saying that all miracles that we find in Torah are programmed into Creation. God loves His universe. God does not like to change His laws, so He programmed into Creation certain events that would unfold at precise moments in the future (Avos 5:6). The prophet knows from God when this event is going to take place, and therefore he informs the people and the people are aware and they can partake of this event. In other words, Sinai, the splitting of the sea [and all other miracles] were built into Creation. Moses forecasted such events for the people to benefit them.

Most religions are self-perpetuating because they like to tell people “We have miracles for you. We have cures.” This is part of their propaganda.

The beautiful thing about Judaism is that our religion took the opposite type of approach: it recognizes natural law and that God does not wish to change His universe. The rabbis did not wish to “sell religion” [with fantastic stories]. What they were selling was something that was unpalpable. That's why Judaism has not been very successful on the whole; it's not offering what people are looking for. The Torah does not sell miracles. The Torah tells us just the opposite, that everything belongs to God's infinite wisdom. The miracles we see are merely things that were programmed into the process.

Therefore, when it says that this fish swallowed Jonah, the rabbis say this was not an ordinary fish: this was a fish that was programmed back at Creation itself. Jonah understood this and then he came to an unbelievable realization of God's infinite kindness. We say that God's kindness is from one universe to another. This means to say that it's infinite; we can't understand God's kindness.

Jonah was able to experience God's kindness. He understood that God—during Creation—knew that there would be a human being that will be caught in a dilemma because he's a prophet. Therefore, God programmed into the creation a certain kind of fish that would give him a certain situation and could teach him an idea: God's infinite kindness.

When Jonah saw this, he was absolutely amazed at the scope of God's kindness which is qualitatively differentiated from what a human being could imagine. Then he came to one conclusion: he did not understand God's divine providence. He originally thought he did, that the mission that he was about to undertake was inconceivable to his mind. He could not run away from his mind. He thought he had no choice but to leave the world of divine providence. But then he saw this fish that was programmed from Creation. This gave him the insight into God's infinite kindness and how much God cares for one person who lived hundreds of years after Creation. God made the situation ready and available for him. Then Jonah said, “I see that I did not have accurate ideas about God's divine providence.” Once Jonah understood this he said, “If that's the case, I must retract my position and I must go on the mission.”

Nevertheless, this fish was only enough to cause him to go on the mission. But he still had the dilemma in his mind because he still did not understand the mission. He still felt these people should not be saved. They were too wicked. God shouldn't save people like these, they must be destroyed. They don't deserve another chance. In another two years, they would be doing the same thing again.

Therefore, while Jonah saw that he was not equipped to make the decision to run away from divine providence, he had yet to understand divine providence. There is no doubt that he had greater insight into divine providence. That's why he says, “I thought I was chased away from before You. But I see that I will be able to look at Your holy temple.”

What is the holy temple? That is the Shechinah, the throne of God and that's exactly what he meant. So, he gained new insight into what divine providence is and how it works. And he saw that he had no right to make that original decision, which was based on a false knowledge of what divine providence is. Once he saw that, he went on his mission. He was still upset, because he believed he did not understand the mission.

What God did for him was to cause the Kikayon to grow. Jonah was in the state of despair. He felt he was dying in the heat, and then this Kikayon grows and shades him. He feels better. Then in a short time the Kikayon dies. Then God says to him as follows: “You notice this Kikayon, this plant. Did you notice how badly you felt when it died? Now, how can I not feel badly about a city which has so many people?”

What is the concept of the Kikayon? What is the analogy to Ninvei? One might think that it doesn't make any sense because Jonah wanted the Kikayon for a very simple reason: protection from the sun's heat. Of course, he is going to feel bad when this plant dies. But what does that have to do with the city of Ninvei and with God?

The answer once again is one which shows us great psychological insight. That is, the prophet teaches us that we are attached to things in a

practical way, which also carries an emotional attachment. Something that provides us with pleasure generates in us a love for that thing. If we lose it we feel upset and that we've lost a part of ourselves. That was the lesson of the Kikayon. The Kikayon was practical. Jonah enjoyed the shade. But when it died, he mourned its loss. Its loss was more than just missing a physical object. He had a certain feeling toward the plant. Therefore, God said to him, "You notice how you are attached to the plant that you didn't even plant. You did no work for it, but it was something that became an extension of yourself. Well, I am the creator of the universe, and I created man. How can I not be attached—in a different way than you can understand—to these people?"

God taught Jonah the idea of His relationship with man; it was completely different than Jonah had imagined. God gave new insight into the relationship between the Creator and his creatures. Once Jonah gained that insight, he was restored as a human being and as a prophet.

We see from Jonah an amazing thing: God always demands that we follow our knowledge. Jonah was caught, but if a person follows his or her knowledge honestly, God stands by and helps the individual.

An apostate or a heretic is not one who uses his mind, but rejects Torah. We maintain that this is not true. We maintain a heretic is a person who is not using his mind properly, but rather distorts his mental apparatus. On the contrary if a person would use his mind honestly, he would see the truth of Torah. If scientists were to study biology properly, they would see the truth of Torah.

Jonah teaches us that we are to use our minds and never deny reason. We may not be in the situation of a Jonah; he was tested to the nth degree, to use his mind to run away from divine providence. But he did the right thing. Jonah teaches us that if we use our minds properly, divine providence will assist us, because God is a teacher. The Torah Giver is the ultimate teacher and Jonah is a beautiful prophecy. Especially when you see God actively teaching man and interacting with man. Man makes

correct steps, the difficult steps, the required steps, and God in turn interacts with him. God teaches him to raise him to a higher level. Jonah teaches us the concept that God is the ultimate teacher, and that is the ultimate kindness. ■