

Yonah, the two-time prophet
Rabbi Maury Grebenau
Yom Kippur 5772

What do we do when we have a conflict with Hashem? When we find His ways inscrutable or even at odds with what we believe to be right? I believe that the book of Yonah is, in part, an answer to this question. Yonah was not able to continue his career as a prophet, and it is because he did not act appropriately in this circumstance. He is a negative example, one that we may identify with, and we are asked to choose a different path.

Aftermath of a fleeing prophet

Yonah begins with the most well-known part of his story: his running from Hashem and refusal to deliver the prophecy he was commanded to give to Ninveh. His ship is tossed on the waves, he is thrown overboard and swallowed by a huge fish where he becomes contrite and is ready to follow Hashem's command. When the third chapter opens Yonah has been spit out onto dry land and Hashem once again speak to him. Although Yonah does give the prophecy as commanded, it is clear that there has been a fundamental misstep in his career as a prophet that can't be fixed.

The Gemara (Yevamot 98a) tells us that the language of the navi here that Hashem spoke to Yonah a 2nd time is meant to exclude a third time – this was it. The Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 21:5) compares Yonah and Adam: They both didn't want to fulfill Hashem's command and they both didn't remain in their previously honored state. Adam had to leave Gan Eiden and Yonah lost his status as a messenger of Hashem. Abarbanel (Yonah 3:1) says that this was *Midah k'neged Midah* - measure for measure – Yonah ran from the opportunity to deliver prophecy and now prophecy runs from him. In this essay, I will focus not on the specifics of why Yonah did not want to deliver the prophecy but rather on what he did when he found himself conflicted about Hashem's command and what we can learn from it.

A Second Chance Lost

Rav Yehoshua Bachrach, in his sefer on Yonah, sees this punishment as more than just a natural outgrowth of Yonah initial hesitation. He sees the ending of Yonah's career as a prophet as stemming from the fact that even in the 3rd chapter when Yonah gets a second chance he does not immediately go to Ninveh and deliver the message after being spit out. He still seems to be hoping that Hashem just won't command him to do it. Perhaps this is the chance for Yonah to really do Teshuva and learn to engage with Hashem in his struggle to understand why Hashem wants him to give this message but instead he does nothing. He does not listen nor does he engage Hashem with his concerns. He just waits. The commentaries offer a number of suggestions for why Yonah initially resists.

The Abarbanel sees 3rd and 4th chapter of Yonah as the final nevuah (prophecy) of the book and of Yonah's relationship with Hashem. He did not achieve the balance of Moshe who challenges Hashem and advocated for the Jewish people but did so through a relationship rather than trying to escape. Moshe stood and spoke and pleaded while Yonah cowered and then slept in a ship where everyone but him prayed. This detail may be shared to foreshadow the fact that even when Yonah is spit out of the fish and charged once again with delivering Hashem's

Yonah, the two-time prophet

Rabbi Maury Grebenau

Yom Kippur 5772

message to Ninveh at the beginning of the 3rd chapter, he really is still in this mode of escape and disengagement, as Rav Bachrach points out.

Yonah reacts to the storm by going to the bottom of the ship and going to sleep. He seems to interpret Hashem's storm as a sign that it was the end of his career as a prophet (and likely his life) but really Hashem was reaching out to reengage with Yonah. Yonah had just fled but Hashem yearned to hear from Yonah and engage with him. Instead, Yonah became depressed and accepted the fate that was never intended. When he was tossed over by the sailors and is swallowed by a huge fish instead of drowning Yonah had a glimmering thought that he had misjudged the situation. Hashem was not looking for his martyrdom for his cause. Yonah's cause was G-d's cause as well. If Hashem wanted him dead, why would He send a fish to swallow and save him?

The beginning of the 3rd chapter, when Yonah has been spit back on to dry land, is an opportunity for Yonah to really do Teshuva and learn to engage with Hashem but instead he does nothing. He does not listen, nor does he engage Hashem with his concerns. He just waits. This is why Hashem reacts by saying this will be their last conversation. Yonah has missed his second opportunity to engage with Hashem as a prophet (and any Jew) should.

In The Text

יונה פרק א

וַיְהִי דְבַר ה' אֶל יוֹנָה בֶן אֲמִתַּי לֵאמֹר:

קוּם לֵךְ אֶל נִינְוָה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה וּקְרָא עָלֶיהָ כִּי עָלְתָה רָעָתָם לְפָנָי:

יונה פרק ג

וַיְהִי דְבַר ה' אֶל יוֹנָה שְׁנִית לֵאמֹר:

קוּם לֵךְ אֶל נִינְוָה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה וּקְרָא עָלֶיהָ אֵת הַקְּרִיאָה אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי דֹבֵר אֵלֶיךָ:

Rav Yehoshua Bachrach takes a very close look at the text and points out two differences between the two times that Yonah is called to action by Hashem that demonstrate the change in relationship between Yonah and Hashem. The first difference is that the first time when Hashem tells Yonah to speak to Ninveh He include concern about the evil they are doing but the second time this is left out. Hashem leaves Yonah out of the partnership and Yonah becomes just a conduit. This is what Yonah has done. It isn't a punishment as much as a direct result of Yonah turning their relationship into a black and white. Either I need to do what Hashem says or not. There is no grappling and struggling or wanting to grow in order to better understand Hashem.

I once had a group of middle school students from a pluralistic day school visit me as a school leader in a school in the same neighborhood. They were doing a project where they interviewed rabbis from different denominations about their approach to Judaism. One student asked me if any of the commandments are difficult for me to understand or relate to since as an Orthodox rabbi I kept all the commandments. In the moment, my response was that there were

Yonah, the two-time prophet

Rabbi Maury Grebenau

Yom Kippur 5772

things that were hard for me to relate to but in a choice between changing the Torah to be in line with my sensibilities and changing my sensibilities to be in line with the Torah, I'd rather stretch to fit the Torah than have the Torah stretch to fit me. This stretch and struggle is part of having a relationship with our Judaism and with Hashem.

When I was a principal of a high school that had a very broad spectrum of Jews, I was sometimes asked by a less religious parent if it was worthwhile to send their questioning child to a Jewish high school. Was there a point to their child being in Jewish school if they had already decided at the age of 16 that they were an atheist. Maybe they should just send them to public school and save the tuition money? I always shared my perspective that there is a value in being in classes that challenge the perspective of being an atheist as opposed to just being in an environment where that perspective would go unchallenged. When a teen is in an environment where they struggle with G-d and their relationship with G-d, even when they are feeling that no relationship exists, or even that no G-d exists, they still are challenged and struggle and that becomes part of their identity. In an environment where those feeling go unchallenged, they are still creating their identity but without any struggle with Hashem included.

The second textual difference between the two times Hashem charges Yonah, is in the word the Navi uses for giving the message to Ninveh. In the second command the word “*Eileha*” is used instead of “*Aleyha*.” First Yonah was calling on them and now he is told to just speak to them. He isn't expected to engage them seriously, as a Navi would, since that would require grappling with this task and bringing himself into the task. Instead Yonah has refused to engage and in doing so becomes simply an instrument of delivery. Yonah's choice to remove himself from a relationship with Hashem means that he is just an observer and can't be the voice of conscience that the position of prophet should embody.

Conclusion

When Avraham engaged with Hashem in discussing if Sedom could be saved and when Moshe defended the Jewish people and begged for their forgiveness, they embodied this struggle with Hashem. When Yonah has misgivings about Hashem's plan, in contrast, he first runs from Hashem and then continues to just be passive – this is what forces Hashem to cut him off as a partner. A Navi is a leader and a role model for our relationship with Hashem and since Yonah does not engage with Hashem he can no longer be a prophet.

Hashem was seeking the partnership in challenge that Moshe and Avraham provided, *k'vayachol*, the *eizer kenegdo* (see Bereishit 2:18) that G-d himself had created as the prime way for human relationships to evolve. But even in Adam's creation, Hashem did not immediately provide this relationship, it was only after the input of Adam that a change was called for. The awakening below must proceed the awakening above. We are asked to engage with Hashem and not to run. To have struggles, doubt and confusions are all within the normal realm of human experience. When we take these feelings and engage with Hashem we connect. This is what we are meant to remember on Yom Kippur afternoon when we hear Yonah read.

In Memory of my father, Dr. Mark Grebenau, Mordechai Dovid ben Chaim