



Jonah and the New Era of *Teshuvah*

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The book of Jonah is a mystery. On the surface, its main message is simple: *teshuvah* (repentance) can avert punishment, just as it did for the people of Nineveh. This is why we read the story of Jonah every Yom Kippur.

But if this is the only lesson of the book, then all we really need is chapter 3. What about the rest of its strange story: the prophet who runs away, his interaction with the sailors, the fish, the gourd, and God's final rhetorical question about pitying not only the people of Nineveh but "also much cattle?"¹ It reads like a beautifully constructed parable, but what does it all mean?

At the center of the story stands the big unanswered question: why does Jonah run away? Here is his own explanation, after he sees that Nineveh has been spared:

יונה ד:ב-ג

וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל אֶל־יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי יְהוָה הֲלוֹא־זֶה דִּבַּרְתִּי עַד־הָיִיתִי עַל־אֲדָמָתִי עַל־כֵּן קִדַּמְתִּי לְבָרִיחַ תַּרְשִׁישָׁה כִּי יָדַעְתִּי כִּי אַתָּה אֱלֹהִים רַחוּם וְרַחוּם אַתָּה אֶרְךָ אֲפִים וְרַב־חֶסֶד וְנֶחֱם עַל־הַרְעָה: וְעַתָּה יְהוָה קַח־נָא אֶת־נַפְשִׁי מִמָּוֶה כִּי טוֹב מוֹתִי מִחַיִּי:

Jonah 4:2-3

He prayed to the Lord, saying, "O Lord! Isn't this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment. Please, Lord, take my life, for I would rather die than live.

¹ Jonah 4:12.



But this is a strange objection. All the major prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and many others—prophesied destruction, while at the same time enjoining Israel to repent and be spared. That is how prophecy is supposed to work, and no other prophet in the Bible seems to have a problem with it. So why is Jonah so upset?

A Rabbinic answer to this question is that Jonah is unhappy because the people who will be spared are non-Jews.² Specifically, the Rabbis say, Jonah is worried that the Ninevites' repentance will make the Jews (who have had many prophets sent to them, all in vain) look bad by comparison. The fact that Nineveh is the capital of Assyria, which later destroys the Ten Tribes, makes the situation all the more fraught. Perhaps Jonah, as a prophet, knows that he is about to engineer the salvation of a city that is destined to destroy his own people.

Yet there is nothing in the book of Jonah itself to suggest such a nationalist focus. Unlike the rest of the books of the Prophets, it never mentions Israel (or, for that matter, Assyria—Nineveh appears in the book as just an isolated city). The book reads like a story outside the regular scope of history: a parable, a universal lesson. As for Nineveh, perhaps the reader is meant to realize the irony of the situation, but there is absolutely no indication in the book that Jonah himself realizes it. It seems more likely that Nineveh here is just an archetypal big city with no specific connection to Jews.

So, to read the book on its own terms, we need a different explanation of Jonah's behavior. Let's go back to the question of how exactly prophecy is supposed to work.

The book of Jonah is undated, but we know approximately when Jonah lived. According to the book of Kings, a prophet named Jonah ben Amittai foretold a minor reconquest of Syrian lands sometime during or prior to the reign of Jeroboam II, king of Israel.³ Thus we know that Jonah was active around 150 years after the kingdom split into Israel and Judah, about a century before the destruction of the Ten Tribes.

This turns out to be a significant time in the history of prophecy. The previous prophet we hear about in 2 Kings is Elisha, who dies a few years before. At around the same time, we start getting the first books of the Latter Prophets: Hosea and Amos both begin their prophecies during the reign of Jeroboam II. We don't know when Joel was active, but the all the other Latter Prophets definitely came later. Thus Jonah stands right at the transition between the Early Prophets and the Latter Prophets. The timeline is a bit vague, but it seems plausible that among the Latter Prophets, Jonah is, in fact, *the* first.

² Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 10.

³ 2 Kings 14:25.



The Early Prophets described in the books of Samuel and Kings lived among the people, helped them find lost donkeys, sometimes performed miracles for those in trouble, sometimes got politically involved, sometimes carried God's message to the king and foretold the downfall of his troops or his dynasty. They didn't talk much about the future on a larger scale, and to the extent that they did talk about the future, *their prophecies always came true*. In fact, the Torah explicitly states that this is how you test whether or not a prophet was sent by God.⁴

So the task that God gives Jonah is unprecedented: no one has ever had to prophesy the imminent destruction of an entire city. But there is another thing that is bothering Jonah: why does God want him to go to Nineveh if everyone in Nineveh will die a few days after hearing the prophecy? If God truly intends to destroy the city, then the lesson of its destruction must be intended for someone else. It would make more sense to prophesy about the fall of Nineveh here in Israel. Then, when the destruction occurs exactly as predicted, people will know that it came from God, will fear His wrath, and will try to mend their ways. That, to Jonah, is how prophecy is supposed to work.

But he wonders: if God is sending him to Nineveh, then God must want the Ninevites to react to the prophecy in some way. Their natural reaction—or at least one possible reaction—will be to repent and ask for mercy. But it makes no sense for God to get the Ninevites to repent only to destroy them afterwards—that would contradict anyone's concept of a just and merciful God. So if the Ninevites do repent, Jonah can only presume that God won't destroy them—and his prophecy will not be fulfilled. If nothing like this has ever happened before (which is what I am asking us to suppose) then, in Jonah's mind, it must threaten the whole institution of prophecy.

But there is actually something even more unprecedented going on here: God is offering the Ninevites the chance to do *preemptive teshuvah*. We are so used to the idea of repentance averting punishment that we forget how radical the concept actually is. But if we look at how the Torah talks about *teshuvah*,⁵ it is always something that happens *after* punishment. Similarly, in all the books of the Early Prophets, the only mention of the root שוב (*shuv*) in the sense of repentance is in Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple:

מלכים א ח:לה-לו

בָּהֶעֱצָר שְׁמַיִם וְלֹא־יְהִי מָטָר כִּי יִחְטְאוּ־לָךְ וְהִתְפַּלְלוּ אֶל־הַמִּקְדָּשׁ הַזֶּה וְהוֹדוּ אֶת־שִׁמְךָ וּמִחֲטָאתָם
 יִשׁוּבוּן כִּי תִעָנֶם וְאַתָּה י תִשְׁמַע הַשָּׁמַיִם וְסָלַחְתָּ לַחֲטָאת עַבְדֶּיךָ וְעַמְּךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל...

⁴ Deuteronomy 18:22.

⁵ Which happens only a couple of times, in Deuteronomy; perhaps surprisingly, *teshuvah* is not a big theme in the Torah.



1 Kings 8:35-36

When heaven is shut up, and there is no rain, because they have sinned against You, if they pray toward this place and call upon Your name and turn from their sin when You afflict them, then may You hear in heaven and forgive the sin of Your servants, Your people Israel...

Note that here too, we are dealing with repentance after punishment. In fact, I looked over the entire Torah and Early Prophets and could not find a single case of someone escaping punishment as a result of repentance.⁶

For example, I think it is safe to assume that Moses repented after striking the rock—but he still did not get to enter the Promised Land. And we know for certain that King Saul repented about sparing the king of Amalek contrary to God’s instructions. After the prophet Samuel informs Saul that he will lose his kingdom as a result of this disobedience, Saul confesses his sin and begs for forgiveness. But Samuel tells him:

שמואל א טו:כט

וְגַם נִצַּח יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יִשְׁקַר וְלֹא יִנָּחֵם כִּי לֹא אָדָם הוּא לְהִנָּחֵם:

1 Samuel 15:29

The Eternal of Israel does not deceive or relent. For He is not a man, that He should relent.

In actuality, the situation is a bit more complicated. We are told many times that God has changed his mind—including in this very chapter, when God tells Samuel that he regrets making Saul king. Sometimes God also relents in the direction of forgiveness, as when Moses begs him not to destroy the Jews after the incident of the Golden Calf. But Samuel’s point is: you don’t get a second chance. You cannot change a prophecy, and you cannot avert punishment by changing your behavior. Sometimes God, of his own accord, unilaterally decides to be merciful. You can try to beg for His mercy, but there is no reason to think this will work.⁷ Some characters in the Early Prophets do beg for mercy, and some just accept judgment gracefully. But no one seems to think that confessing one’s sin or mending one’s ways is going to *prevent* punishment.

So the concept of repentance in the first half of the Bible works very differently from the way we think of it now. Repentance is just a step in a simple mechanism of cause and effect: you

⁶ The only possible exception is Ahab, after Elijah rebukes him over his seizure of Naboth’s vineyard. But even there, it is not Ahab’s repentance but his submission that moves God, and the punishment is not canceled, only delayed. See 1 Kings 21: 27-29.

⁷ In fact, it basically never works: the only exceptions are when Moses begs for the Jews not to be destroyed, plus the strange case of Ahab discussed in previous note.



sin and you are punished; then you repent and stop sinning, and the punishment stops too. Perhaps that is why the Torah does not make such a big deal of *teshuvah*: the idea that the punishment should cease once the sinning has ceased seems pretty intuitive—though of course we should be grateful that God is merciful enough to give us even that chance.

And then suddenly, one day, God sends Jonah to Nineveh, seemingly for no other possible reason than to give the Ninevites a chance to repent before the punishment comes. We modern readers are too used to the concept of preemptive *teshuvah* to appreciate how much this mission would have shaken the foundations of Jonah's world. It upends everything he believes about how prophecy works, how justice works, how the human relationship with God works. No wonder he can't handle it and runs away.

Then comes the storm at sea and, once again, Jonah's actions seem inexplicable. When the sailors ask him what they should do to save the ship, why doesn't he tell them, "Take me back to Jaffa and I will go and do what God told me?" For all we know, that might have been enough to stop the storm; at least it seems worth trying. But Jonah never suggests it. Instead, he tells the sailors to throw him into the sea. His world does not contain the possibility of a second chance, of repentance without atonement: he knows that he has sinned and must be punished.

In fact, what happens on the ship gives a perfect model of how Jonah thinks the world is supposed to work. The sinner must face the consequences of his sin, this teaches others to fear God's judgment, to pray for His mercy, and to forsake their evil ways (as indeed the sailors end up doing). So the ship becomes a microcosm of what Jonah would have wanted to happen at Nineveh. By telling the sailors to throw him overboard, he becomes a true prophet of his own destruction.

Of course, there is another possible explanation for why Jonah does not ask the sailors to take him back to Jaffa: perhaps he is still being obstinate and would rather die than do what God told him. Under this interpretation, Jonah's resolve weakens only after he is subjected to the terror and suffering of near-drowning and of being swallowed by the fish. But in Jonah's own description of his experience—his prayer in chapter 2—there is no mention of giving in under duress. Rather, he describes himself as someone who was completely prepared to die—who had already gone through all the stages of drowning—but at the last minute threw himself on God's mercy and is exultant to have been given a second chance. This is exactly the model of *teshuvah* that we find in the first half of the Bible and that Jonah subscribes to: you sin, you are punished, *then* you repent and beg for mercy, and you are redeemed.

Perhaps this can also explain the puzzle of the last two verses of Jonah's prayer:



יונה ב:ט-י

משמרים הבלי-שנא חסדם יעזבו: ואני בקול תודה אֶזְבַּח־לָךְ אֲשֶׁר נָדַרְתִּי אֶשְׁלֶמָה יְשׁוּעָתָה לִיקוּק:

Jonah 2:9-10

Those who follow vain idols will forsake their loyalty. But I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving. I will pay what I have vowed.

Who are these people who “follow vain idols,” who will in the future forsake their current loyalty? Radak on this verse explains that Jonah is talking about the sailors. However, this is problematic, since Jonah has absolutely no reason to bad-mouth the sailors: their behavior has been exemplary throughout. Anyway, the sailors are unlikely to be foremost in Jonah’s mind at this point. More plausible is Malbim’s suggestion that he is thinking of the Ninevites. But how can Jonah be so sure that the Ninevites’ *teshuvah* will not be lasting, whereas his own will? Jonah’s prayer suggests that the key difference is that his *teshuvah* comes from the depths of his punishment: “When my life was ebbing away, I called the Lord to my mind.”⁸ In contrast, any *teshuvah* that does not stem from punishment will necessarily be superficial.

Similarly, I have always been bothered by Jonah’s seeming hypocrisy in chapter 4, when he accepts his own salvation but not the Ninevites’. How can he complain that the Ninevites go unpunished, when he himself has sinned yet did not die? But if Jonah believes in *teshuvah* only after punishment, then his complaint makes perfect sense.

God’s answer to Jonah lies in the story of the gourd, which God explicitly labels as a metaphor for the fates of human beings. The chain of events seems to be as follows:

- The gourd grows and brings great joy to Jonah;
- A worm destroys the gourd from within;
- With the gourd weakened by the worm, the wind knocks it down.

The metaphor is clear. In themselves, humans are a source of joy to God. But if the worm of sin eats away at their insides, their destruction will follow as a natural consequence.

What God is saying to Jonah is that He, like Jonah, is unhappy with this chain of events. It is a shame for a beautiful gourd to die or for a human city to be destroyed. The Hebrew verb לחוס (*la-hus*, to pity)—“you pitied the gourd... shall I not pity Nineveh”—expresses exactly this sentiment. In the Bible, this verb generally refers not to mercy or compassion, but to the feeling of unhappiness at the destruction of something good or valuable, the way we would

⁸ Jonah 2:8.



say “What a pity!” God declares to Jonah that he is sick of such wasteful destruction of His creatures.

God’s radical solution is to offer human beings the possibility of preemptive *teshuvah*. This ushers in the age of the Latter Prophets, whose prophecies are full of promises of destruction. Jonah’s story is what allows us to see their words as promises of salvation, since it tells us that from now on, destruction can be averted by our own efforts. Thus, for example:

ירמיה כו:יא-יב

וַיֹּאמְרוּ הַכֹּהֲנִים וְהַנְּבִיאִים אֶל־הַשָּׂרִים וְאֶל־כָּל־הָעָם לֵאמֹר מִשְׁפַּט־מוֹת לְאִישׁ הַזֶּה כִּי נִבֵּא אֶל־הָעִיר
הַזֹּאת כְּאִשֶּׁר שָׁמַעְתֶּם בְּאָזְנֵיכֶם:

וַיֹּאמֶר יִרְמְיָהוּ אֶל־כָּל־הַשָּׂרִים וְאֶל־כָּל־הָעָם לֵאמֹר יְהוָה שְׁלַחְנִי לְהַנְבִּיא אֶל־הַבַּיִת הַזֶּה וְאֶל־הָעִיר הַזֹּאת
אֶת כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַעְתֶּם:

Jeremiah 26:11-12

Then the priests and the prophets said to the officials and all the people, “This man should be sentenced to death because he has prophesied against this city. You have heard it with your own ears!”

Then Jeremiah said to all the officials and all the people: “The Lord sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the things you have heard. Now reform your ways and your actions and obey the Lord your God. Then the Lord will relent and not bring the disaster he has pronounced against you.”

Jeremiah uses the same verb “relent” that we saw before—the very thing that Samuel told Saul could never happen! Jeremiah’s confidence that it *must* happen as a result of *teshuvah* (notice, there’s no “maybe” here) represents an epochal transition.

So this, perhaps, is the significance of the book of Jonah: it is the inauguration of the era of *teshuvah* as we know it, the kind of *teshuvah* that we habitually take for granted every Yom Kippur. The story of Jonah is the story of one man from the old world order trying to comprehend this change and struggling to accept it. Through Jonah’s eyes and his struggle, we see just how radical a change it is.

When viewed in this way, God’s declaration to Jonah at the end of the book is reminiscent of His promise to Noah after the flood.⁹ The flood was a major turning point in God’s

⁹ Perhaps Jonah’s time inside the fish is even supposed to remind us of Noah in the ark.



relationship to humanity: afterwards, God declares that he has had enough of destruction and puts a limit on how much of it He is willing to inflict on the world.¹⁰

Perhaps the book of Jonah signals a second such turning point, in which God offers human beings the possibility, never before available, of escaping punishment altogether. This new promise, as world-changing as the one made to Noah, is once again directed at all of humanity, not just the Jews. From now on, we are told, *teshuvah* is given power over punishment and even prophecy—because living beings, even sinful ones, are too precious to destroy.

¹⁰ Not just on humanity: God's statement in Jonah 4:11 that he does not want to destroy animals for human sins is also an echo of the flood.

