4. Hitting Rock Bottom

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Verse 4: And God sent a mighty wind into the sea, and it became a great storm, and the ship was about to collapse.

Yona tried to escape from the Divine word (prophecy), fleeing from the land of Israel, the only place where God communicates with His prophets. Yona goes to the sea. And although He is no longer communicating with Yona through words, God does not let Yona to getting away from his mission. The Sages noted that one of the most common instruments that God uses to intervene in nature is the wind. The wind served as an instrument of God in the Creation of the world; in the plagues, and in the opening of the Sea of Reeds. As King David said: □□□□ □□□ □□□□ □□□□ “The stormy wind, which obeys the word of God.” And we recognize this in the Amida when we praise HaShem “who blows the wind to produce rain”. In our case, HaShem sends a powerful wind, which becomes a storm that hits the vessel. The question now is: will Yona react this time and accept the imperative Divine call? Will he resume his mission? Will Yona find any other way to escape?

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Verse 5: *The sailors feared [for their lives]. Each begged their gods and threw the load into the sea to relieve the weight of the ship. Yona, however, descended to the bottom of the ship, he laid down and fell into a deep sleep.*

The sailors recognized the Divine intervention, and acted accordingly: they prayed. And threw the valuable cargo into

the sea, something the crew would only do when there was no other option left. Because when sailing, the greatest danger to a boat, is sinking because of the weight of water –rainwater and seawater coming from the high waves – and the cargo.
And what did Yona do while everyone was praying?
Incredibly, and while everyone else was in panic, “Yona descended to the bottom” of the ship –now empty of merchandise– laid down and fell asleep!

To fully explore all the psychological aspects of Yona’s reaction would require to write an entire book. But, briefly, Yona is not reacting with indifference towards the storm. “Sleeping” or going to sleep, deactivating his active mind, is part of his escape from God. He knows HaShem is looking for him. The Sages observed that the biblical text uses three times the word vayered, which means “and he descended.” This descent is not only physical: it is a mental descent. It is not a descent that leads to a deeper thought. It is a descent that leads to “stop thinking”, putting your mind to sleep, anesthesia. A perfect mental escape.

In a brilliant and very beautiful way, because of the play on words, the Biblical text describes the progressive descent of Yona into a self induce mental blockage : □□□□□ □□□□ □□□□ □□□□
“And Yona descended, … and descended … and descended … and he fell deeply asleep”. This last Hebrew word vayradem describes a deep state of sleep (delta brain waves) In modern Hebrew the word “hardama” is used to mean anesthesia) in which we “lose” consciousness. Unlike the Hebrew word “vayshan” a more superficial state of sleep.
For Yona, in the middle of the storm, the only way to get away from God is by stop thinking about Him and about His call. Deactivating the mind; surrendering to sleep.

I think that we all act sometimes in a similar way. For numberless reasons, many times we want (we need!) to escape from our Divine mission. We don’t think about the meaning of

our life. Going to sleep is the most innocent way to escape reality, responsibility – or God's call. There are deeper or more modern ways to escape our existential questions: getting drunk, getting high … or, more commonly, wasting our time with entertainment and distractions to keep our mind blank and escape the existential question. Deliberately ignoring God's call to us, i.e., His Torah. When we do that we repeat, in a certain way, the behavioral pattern of Yona.

When reaching the bottom of the ship, Yona also arrives at the end of his escape. Seemingly, he cannot get any lower. Or can he?