1. The Prophet and His Mission

□□□□ □□□□□ □□ □□□□ □□‘ □ □□□ □□□

The book of Yona is read on the day of Kippur, in the afternoon, at Mincha prayer. It was chosen by our Sages for that occasion because the story of Yona is intimately related to Teshuba, repentance.

Yona lived around the year 800-780 before the common era, in the time of King Yerob’am ben Yoash. He resided in the Kingdom of Israel (also known as “the 10 tribes”, which separated a century earlier from the Kingdom of Yehuda). The capital of the Kingdom of Israel was the city of Shomron. The situation in Shomron was not very good from the religious point of view. The kings of Israel, in their eagerness for commercial and military success made alliances with neighboring peoples, such as the Phoenicians in Sidon (today’s Lebanon). These alliances had a cultural and religious negative impact . King Achab, for example, married the Phoenician princess Izebel, who imported to Israel and popularized the cult to the idol Ba’al. HaShem sent many prophets to warn Israel of their wrongdoings, such as Eliyahu haNabi or his disciple, Elisha. Yona belongs to this”school” of prophets. However, when God spoke to Yona did not ask him to speak to his own people.

□□□□□□ □□□□ □□□□□ □□ □□ □□□

HaShem asked Yona to go to Nineveh – a non-Jewish metropolis – and communicate His word to the inhabitants of that city.

Nineveh was located on the banks of the Tigris river, today’s Mosul, in Iraq. Nineveh was not a common city. It was the capital of the first empire in history, Assyria, which at the time of the Prophet Yona was at its highest moment.

There is something else about Nineveh: the text calls Nineveh "**ha**ir **ha**gedola", "the big city". We know that Nineveh was a big town (*'ir gedola*) since it took 3 days go on foot form one end to the other. But what does the emphasis *"the" big city* mean? Today, thanks to modern archaeological discoveries –which again and again confirm everything that our Torah affirms – we can better understand the meaning of this expression. Matt Rosenberg, in a book called "Largest cities through history" indicates that until the year 612 BCE, Nineveh was "the largest city in the world". It had an area of □□more than 7 square km. The Old City of Jerusalem, for example, had an area of 0.9 square kilometers, and Shomron, which was larger than Jerusalem, was about 1.5 square kilometers. In addition, Nineveh was a megacity in terms of its population, as it is mentioned at the end of the book. The Hebrew expression *hair hagedola* therefore does not mean just "a big city" but "*the*" largest and most important city" in the world. HaShem did not send Yona to deliver His message to a small town. HaShem sent him to the New York City of that time.

□□□□ □□□□ □□□□ □□ □□□□ □□□□

In that intimidating metropolis, the Jewish prophet had to denounce loudly their deeds and warn them that God was not willing to ignore and tolerate their wrongdoing anymore.

What were the inhabitants of Nineveh doing wrong? As we will see later in chapter 3, the text talks about *chamas*. The word *hamas* in Hebrew means "corruption": robbery, bribery, abuse, promiscuity, etc. The Torah uses this word to describe the crime committed by the generation of the flood. Our rabbis also observed that other expressions used both here and in chapter 3 regarding the iniquity of Nineveh *('aleta ra'atam, nehepekhet*, etc.) mirror the expressions used by the Torah in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah.

These subtle references leave no doubt about the Divine intention: Nineveh, like the human civilization at the time of

the flood, or Sodom and Gomorrah in the time of Abraham, deserved to be destroyed and erased.

Now we can understand better why God sent Yona to Nineveh. The prophet of Israel had to go to the largest city in the world –which was also the most corrupt city– to publicly denounce in the name of God the general state of corruption and convince them to believe that if they would not repent the city will be destroyed. Was this a mission impossible?