2. Escaping from God

God ordered Yona to go to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, and the largest city in the world at that time (eighth century BCE).

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But Yona [did not obey the Divine order] and tried to escape to Tarshish, fleeing from the presence of God.

Surprisingly, the prophet disobeys God’s direct command and tries to run away! Before addressing the main question of this extraordinary book—why would a prophet, the epitome of a fearful Jew, refuse to fulfill God’s direct order – let us reflect for a moment on Yona’s act of disobedience.

FREEDOM OF CHOICE

Yona is not the only Prophet who refuses to become God’s agent and bring the people His message of warning– what is called in Hebrew *nebua* or prophecy. Yirmiyahu and even Moses tried to avoid a similar mission. But without doubt, the fact that Yona tries to flee “physically” from God, represents the most extreme form of refusal to carry out the Divine mission. At the same time, the actions of Yona show us once again the extension of the Jewish principle of “freedom of choice”. Humans have the option to obey or even disobey HaShem. God, on the other hand, manifests His will, but He does not intervene in our minds to make us His robots. He does not hijack Yona’s mind and willpower. Human intelligence, unlike artificial intelligence, allows us to think, evaluate and freely choose our actions and behaviors. What happened with Yona , in certain sense, happens every day to us if we disobey or ignore the Torah. We behave like Yona if we exercise our freedom of choice and reject God’s commands. In Yom Kippur we should reflect on this as we dedicate ourselves to recognize that when we ignore HaShem’s commandments we distance ourselves

from Him. And we have to determine, exercising our free will again, to return to God and reconcile with Him.

TARSHISH

In order to run away from God, Yona tries to escape to Tarshish. Where is Tarshish, and why does Yona specifically want to flee to Tarshish? According to one opinion, Tarshish is Tarsus, a city in Turkey 15 miles from the Mediterranean Sea. Other commentators say that it could be Tyre, on the coast of Lebanon. According to the Roman historian Rufus Festo Avienus (4th century) Tarshish is "Cadiz", a famous port city in Spain! In ancient times, the Greeks called the southern part of the Iberian Peninsula (Cádiz, Seville, etc.) Tartasus: a region famous for an abundance of minerals and metals. The prophet Ezekiel (27:12) mentions the tar, silver, iron, lead and tin that people imported from Tarshish. Now, if Tarshish is in Spain, fleeing to Tarshish in the days of Yona would be like fleeing literally "to the end of the world". Why? Because we know that for the Greeks, or even for the Phoenicians, the Hercules Pillars, what we call today as the Strait of Gibraltar, was considered geographically *the end of the world*, just before the endless Atlantic Ocean. Yona tried to escape as far as possible from God (see below), to the farthest place that he could conceive.

GOD'S PERMANENT RESIDENCE

But how is it possible that Yona thought that he can flee from God? We Jews believe that God is Omnipresent: He is and exists everywhere (□□□□□ □□□□ □□ □□□□). Our rabbis addressed this question and formulated a beautiful response (a little shameful for those of us who are not yet where we should be): *nebua* or prophecy, the direct communication between God and a human being, is only possible in the land of Israel. That is why Yona does not flee on foot or on horseback, to the north or the south, but goes literally "overseas". In his mind the most effective way to stop hearing God's voice is to leave the land of Israel! God "dwells" in Israel. Israel is where His

voice can be heard. Running away from Israel means running away from God.