3. Why Did Yona Run Away?

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And Yona went down [to the port of] Jaffa; and found [there] a ship going to Tarshish. He paid for the ship and descended to it to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of God

YONA IN TEL-AVIV

Yona rejected the Divine mission to announce the destruction of Nineveh, and planned to escape to Tarshish, a port-city on the Iberian peninsula, probably the farthest destination he could find. Yona arrived to the port of Yafó (in modern Hebrew “Yafo”, in English Jaffa, today within the municipality of Tel-Aviv). Yafo was for centuries the most important port in Israel. All maritime trade went through this port. King Solomon , for example, brought via Yafo the wood from Lebanon that was used for the construction of the Bet haMiqdash (Dibre Hayamim II, 2:15). In the modern Jaffa there are some things that remind us of Yona’s journey. For example, a street (see illustration above), which descends towards the port and is called “Yonah haNabí”, “the prophet Jonah”.

Once at the port, the prophet Yona found a boat that was going to Tarshish, probably a Phoenician ship, since they were the great navigators of the time. The text tells us that Yona paid for “the ship”, instead of saying that he paid for his own “ticket” (sekharo). The Sages observed that in his haste to escape, Yona disbursed an exorbitant sum of money and hired the boat privately.

This detail invites us to ask ourselves one more time why Yona wanted so much to escape from his Divine mission? The biblical text does NOT reveal the reason for the behavior of its protagonists. The text leaves that topic for us to explore on our own, and learn the corresponding lessons.

FOUR ANSWERS

I know four possible answers to this question. All have something in common: that Yona is acting wrongly by trying to escape from God, and in the end, God teaches him a lesson. The first three answers, each present one possible reason why Yona escaped. But I think these responses do not answer, for example, why Yona’s book is read on Yom Kippur, that is: why

our Sages chose the story of Yona as the text that should inspire us to repentance on the Day of Forgiveness. Answer number 4 in my opinion, which looks at the dynamic between Teshuba, repentance, and impunity, fully solves this question and settles perfectly with the story. But this answer, to which I adhere, will have to be on a waiting list, because we have to know a little more the story of Yona to gradually discover the prophet's ways of thinking.

Let's see now the first three possible answers, all based on the Sages, presented briefly and with my own words.

#1 . YONA FEARED FOR HIS OWN LIFE

The prophets in general were in a catch-22 situation. They had to warn the people, usually the Jewish people, that a tragedy was going to happen if people persist in their behavior. But if God decided to forgive the people, the prophet would be regarded as an impostor! The rabbis explained that this had already happened to Yona when he prophesied in the Kingdom of Israel. Now, Yona knows that something similar will happen in Nineveh (Tanchuma Vayqra 8) with one difference: in Nineveh he will be a stranger, and his bold warning would probably cost him his life. According to this opinion, HaShem teaches Yona that saving the lives of the inhabitants of Nineveh should be more important for him than preserving his own life.

#2. YONA DID NOT WANT TO SAVE THE ENEMIES OF ISRAEL

Don Ytshaq Abarbanel (1437-1508) explains that Yona did not want to save the Assyrians, who eventually ended up destroying the city of Shomron, killing thousands of Jews, destroying the Kingdom of Israel (722 BCE) and exiling the 10 tribes. It is as if a Jew today would try to help preserving the Iranian regime, which has publicly declared its intention to erase the State of Israel from the map.

#3. YONA CARED FOR THE REPUTATION OF HIS PEOPLE

The Jerusalem Talmud (Sanh 11: 5) explains that Yona knew that idolatrous peoples are easy to convince, influenceable (□□□□□ □□□□□) and that they would surely rectify their evil deeds immediately. This easiness to change their behavior from one day to another may be the result of the nature of pagan culture: Idolatrous people were used to following the arbitrary dictates of their priests, who would use random "bad omens" to intimidate the people and manipulate the masses with ease. A society –or an individual– that is driven by

“superstitions” is ready to do anything out of fear. Yona was convinced that in Nineveh, his announcement about the destruction of the city would be processed via superstition and would be accepted immediately. Which is what ended happening. Yona thought that the imminent repentance of the inhabitants of Nineveh would be a terrible precedent for the Jews of the Kingdom of Israel. At that time the Yehudim were in a very low spiritual state. They practiced idolatry, transgressed the Torah, and ignored the warnings of the Prophets. It was very difficult to convince them to listen! Jews were not superstitious like other peoples, and might have processed “prophecy” as “bad omens” and seeing prophets as charlatans, therefore, they did not listen. The Sages said, thus, that this might have been why Yona tried to escape the Divine call: so that the repentance of Nineveh will not incriminate the Jews, exposing their rejection to listen to the prophets and to change their bad habits.