9. The lesson we learned from the first chapter

We are finishing the first of the four chapters of the book of Yona

THE TORAH AND THE SEA

One of the most fascinating elements of the biblical texts is that its stories contain much more than the narrative tells. In a way that only the Torah can do it, the plot of the story also hides a number of sub-stories, moral ideas and philosophical concepts that are interwoven with the narrative, and that a distracted reader would not able to perceive. When we read a Biblical text thinking that the message is limited to the story at hand, we are looking at the surface of the sea, ignoring its oceanic depth. The book of Yona is no exception.

Seemingly, the first chapter tells the simple story of a man escaping from Israel (God's residence) by sea. But between the lines of the text we find several sub-stories containing moral concepts and dilemmas of not easy solution. For example: Can a man ignore his Divine call? What is the extension, and what are the limits of a man's free will? What is the relationship between escaping from God and Yona's psychological denial? What resources does God use to redirect us when we lose our way? Can we interpret natural phenomena, a storm, or misfortunes, as vehicles of Divine intervention or Divine calls? And if so, what are the rules of the game of these interpretations? And much, much more.

I would like to explore now what might be the most relevant and extensive sub-topic of this chapter. The behavior of the gentiles in the story of Yona.

WHO DESERVES TO BE SAVED?

Remember that the mission God assigns Yona is saving Nineveh, a non-Jewish city. Yona escapes from this mission, but the text does not explain why. We already mentioned three possible scenarios. The classic explanation, which most rabbis follow (see Radaq), is that Yona considered that if the inhabitants of Nineveh repent, the reputation of the Jewish people, who unfortunately almost never listened to the warnings of their

prophets (there is no prophet in his own land?), is going to be badly affected.
And what happened on the ship seems to be aimed to modifying Yona's ideas. Making him to see that, despite the price that Israel will be forced to pay, HaShem still wants to give the people of Nineveh the opportunity to be saved. As the story unfolds, Yona discovers that the non-Jewish sailors are not horrible people. On the contrary; when the sailors become convinced that Yona is the culprit of the storm, and that the only way to save their lives is to get rid of Yona, they do not rush to throw Yona into the sea. They try to return to the mainland, and do all in their hands to keep Yona safe and alive. Rabbi Isaac Abarbanel explains that Yona now discovers the great compassion of these gentile sailors. They were willing to risk their lives to save the life of a Jew! It would be very difficult to deny that this gesture of the sailors did not make Yona reassess the objective of his mission in a more positive way…
LEARN TESHUBA FROM WHOEVER DID IT
When the storm does not stop, the non-Jewish sailors pray to HaShem (not to "their gods"), recognizing the God of Israel. Before throwing Yona into the sea, the sailors ask HaShem not to consider them guilty of the death of an innocent man. Likewise, in the last verse of the first chapter, when the storm stops, the sailors offer sacrifices to HaShem, and dedicate their vows and promises. Some commentators explained, based on all these invocations to HaShem—the God of Israel, as opposed to Eloqim, a general name for "God"— that the sailors embraced Judaism. Yona must have noticed now that Gentiles can recognize HaShem, repent and avert a tragedy. His mission is feasible.
Perhaps Yona sees now that, if not able to learn from our own experience, the Jewish people might need to learn the greatest lesson about repentance from a story that involves gentiles. Which is what really ends up happening! The story of Yona – a Divine prophecy addressed to gentiles and their positive reaction to it– contains what the Rabbis considered to be the most important lesson for our own repentance on Yom Kippur. ,□□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□ □□ ,□□□□□ □□□□□□□ □□□□ □□□□□□ □□□□ □□□□ □□□□ □□ □□□□□□ □□ □□□□□□ □□□□ □□□ , □□□□□□ □□□ □□□ □□ □□□□□□ □□□□ □□□□ □□□□□ □□□. When the people of Nineveh repented …"God did

not pay so much attention to the people’s prayers and fasts. God paid attention to their actions! He saw that they changed their bad behavior and improved their moral ways, and He forgave them.”

And that is the greatest and most important lesson for Yom Kippur.