

# **JONAH THE REBELLIOUS PROPHET: A LOOK AT THE MAN BEHIND THE PROPHECY BASED ON BIBLICAL AND RABBINIC SOURCES**

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The main theme of the Book of Jonah appears to be the power of penitence [*teshuvah*]. There are two stories of sin and penitence in the Book: the primary one, that of Nineveh, the city that God will overturn if it does not repent, and the sin of the prophet who turns against his task, and attempts to evade carrying the Divine command to cry unto the city to repent.<sup>1</sup>

Jonah's fall into sin is gradual. The text begins with God saying to Jonah: 'Arise' (1:2), but Jonah instead **went down** to the port of Jaffa and **went down** into the ship (1:3), and then **went down** into the recess of the ship (1:5). Then, he was cast into the sea (1:15) and swallowed up by a fish (2:1). We have here four descents: The journey down (southward) to Jaffa, then down into the boat, then down into the hold of the boat, and then down into the depths of the sea.

The fish keeps Jonah at the depths of the sea until the moment he is willing to carry out God's command: '*I will pay which I have vowed*' (2:10). Then it vomits him out and in an instant all the way back to dry land (2:11). This, then, is a metaphor for sin and penitence. The fall is gradual. This could be understood to signify that in life one falls slowly until reaching the lowest of rungs, wondering how one got there and how to ascend from it. However, the power of *teshuvah* is such that it can bring someone from the lowest depth to the highest plane in an instant.<sup>2</sup>

The continuation of the story shows the difficulty that Jonah has with the concept of *teshuvah*. How can God forgive such sinners? A midrashic interpretation states that Jonah's worry was that, if this non-Israelite city of Nineveh repented, then it would look bad for the rebellious Kingdom of Israel and God would have to punish it: "He figured to himself that since the nations are easily brought to repentance they will repent and the Holy One Blessed Be He will let His wrath out on Israel."<sup>3</sup> This midrash arose out of Jonah's admission: '*Therefore I fled beforehand to Tarshish: for I knew that You are a*

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*gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abundant in kindness and forgiving of evil'* (4:2). According to this interpretation, Jonah's problem with *teshuvah* is not a conceptual one, but rather something more specific, relating to the moral and spiritual level of the Kingdom of Israel at the time. All this is an explanation of the story from the point of view of a teaching on penitence. However, the story can be told differently if put into a socio-historical context.

#### JONAH THE MAN

Jonah was a prophet from Gath-hefer in the Kingdom of Israel, then under the rule of Jeroboam II. Gath-hefer is a city of the northern tribe of Zebulun, as the text says: *And the third lot came out in favor of the children of Zevulun according to their families, and the border of their inheritance was as far as Sarid . . . and from there it passed on along the east to Gath-hefer* (Josh. 19:10-13). The tribe of Zebulun is described in Jacob's prophetic last words to his children as maritime merchants involved in the shipping trade: *'Zevulun shall dwell at the shore of the sea: and he shall be a haven for ships'* (Gen. 49:13). If this is so, then we can assume that Jonah, being a Zebulunite, was quite comfortable on ships. The Talmud says that his father was from the tribe of Zebulun and his mother was from the tribe of Asher.<sup>4</sup>

A midrash states that he received prophecy three times: "The first time he was sent to restore the borders of Israel."<sup>5</sup>

*In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash, king of Judah, Jeraboam II the son of Joash, king of Israel, began to reign in Samaria and he reigned forty-one years. And he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord: he departed not from all the sins of Jeraboam the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin. He restored the border of Israel from the entrance of Hamat to the sea of the Arava, according to the word of the Lord God of Israel, which He spoke by the hand of His servant Jonah, the son of Amittai, the prophet, of Gath-hefer. For the Lord saw the affliction of Israel that it was very bitter: for there was not any shut up, nor any left free, nor any helper for Israel* (II Kg. 14:23-26).

Since this prophecy materialized, Jonah was probably seen as somewhat of a local hero. When did this happen? Was this before or after he was told to go to Nineveh?

According to this midrash, the second occasion was when Jonah, from the Northern Kingdom of Israel, prophesied to the Southern Kingdom of Judah that its capital, Jerusalem, would be destroyed if the inhabitants did not repent "but the Holy One Blessed Be He in His great mercy overturned the evil decree and they called him a false prophet."<sup>6</sup> This was easy for the Judeans to say, since Jonah was not only from the Northern Kingdom, which did not get along with its southern neighbor, but also was hailed there as a patriotic hero.

"The third time, he was sent to Nineveh to destroy it."<sup>7</sup> This third prophetic mission was the one that made Jonah run away. Why now? Why after the third prophecy? To understand this, we must understand Jonah the man.

Jonah was a lover of his people. The children of Israel, whether North or South, were his people. Despite the fact that Jeroboam I made Beth-El into the religious center of the Northern Kingdom (I Kg. 12:28.-29), Jonah refused to follow that reform and continued to keep the three annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem. In fact, according to the Talmud, he was so devout in this regard that his wife accompanied him on these pilgrimages even though it was not the customary thing to do.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, one such pilgrimage may have been the starting moment of the third prophecy.

The celebration in the Temple during the festival of Sukkot, the first of the three pilgrimage holy days, was called *Simhat Beth Hasho'eva*, the joyful ceremony of drawing the water to be poured on the altar as part of the prayer service for rain.<sup>9</sup> The Jerusalem Talmud teaches that the name *Beth Hasho'eva* [The House of Drawing] referred to the holy spirit which could be drawn from Heaven upon the individuals attending this event.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the celebrations of the *Beit Hasho'eva* could bring one to a prophetic encounter. In fact, the Talmud states that this is exactly what happened to Jonah.

Rabbi Yochanan said: "Jonah ben Amittai was among the holiday pilgrims [*olei regalim* to the Temple]. He entered the water libation festival [*simhat beth hasho'eva*] and the holy spirit rested upon him. This teaches us that the holy spirit rests only on one who is happy of heart."<sup>11</sup>

The Talmud goes on to say that the reason he went to Jaffa and not to Acre, which is a port closer to his home town, is that he was at the Temple in Jerusalem at the time he received his prophetic mission.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, rabbinic literature sees Jonah not as a seasoned prophet preparing for an encounter, but as a simple God-fearing Israelite from the Northern Kingdom who happened to experience a prophetic encounter in the Temple during the festivities of the *Beth Hasho'eva*. In accordance with this idea, we can reconstruct his prophetic career as follows: Jonah goes to the Temple on *Simhat Beth Hasho'eva* and, for the first time in his life, experiences a prophetic inspiration. In this first prophecy, God tells him that He intends to restore the borders of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Thrilled, Jonah rushes to the Northern king's palace to announce the good news, and when it comes to pass, he is considered a national hero. The second time he experiences a prophetic encounter he is again in the Temple. This second time, God tells him that He intends to destroy Jerusalem unless the people repent. Jonah now goes to the Southern king's palace and probably does not get an audience with the king. When this prophecy does not come to pass, the Southern kingdom brands him a false prophet and *persona non grata*. However, he still continues his three annual pilgrimages to the Temple.

Then, some time later, he hears his third call to prophesy, the one recorded in the Book of Jonah, when God tells him that He intends to destroy Nineveh. Who were the people of Nineveh and what was their relationship to the Northern Kingdom? Jonah lives in the time of Jeroboam II (785-744 B.C.E),<sup>13</sup> not long before the Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the exile of its people in 722 B.C.E. During the reign of King Menahem ben-Gadi, shortly after Jeroboam II's reign and before the conquest of 722 B.C.E. the King of Assyria imposed his rule over the land, making Menahem a vassal ruler who paid allegiance and taxes to Assyria. Assuming that political events do not happen in a vacuum, we can assume that during Jonah's lifetime, the Assyrians were already seen as a grave threat to the Northern Kingdom. We can then further assume that in those days Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria<sup>14</sup> could stand for an arch-enemy poised for the destruction of Israel.

Bearing this in mind, we can now go back to our conjecture about Jonah in the Temple receiving his third prophecy, *'Arise, go to Nineveh, the great city, and cry against it for their wickedness is come up before Me'* (Jon. 1:2).

Allow me to paraphrase:

God says to Jonah: "Jonah, the Assyrians are a wicked people." Jonah nods in agreement.

God says: "Jonah, I am thinking of destroying the inhabitants of its capital city in 40 days." Jonah thinks to himself, "Yes, please do"

Then God says: "Now Jonah, as you know I am a God of mercy, so arise, go, and tell them to repent."

Appalled, Jonah now runs out of the Temple. He knows that God will not go back on His word. So all he himself can do is run away and stall for time, for it is 40 days and counting to the destruction of the capital of his arch-enemy's country.<sup>15</sup> He flees to the far-off city of Tarshish *from the presence of the Lord* (1:3). What does it mean to flee from *the presence of the Lord*? It means to leave the land of Israel, about which the Torah says, *Always are the Lord your God's eyes upon it from the beginning of the year until the end of the year* (Deut. 11:12). This is also the exclusive land for prophecy.<sup>16</sup> As Judah Halevi will say years later, prophecy can happen either "in the land or for the land of Israel."<sup>17</sup>

In any event, Jonah did not want to be the one to bring the Assyrians to penitence. So he boarded a ship and went to sleep. The winds blew, the storm raged on, but Jonah slept (Jon. 1:5). He was not oblivious to what was happening, he just did not care. He knew that the storm was due to his actions: *And he said to them: 'Take me up and cast me into the sea so shall the sea be calm for you. For I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you.'* (1:12). Finally, the sailors threw Jonah into the sea. Even in the belly of the fish, he seems undisturbed. His prayer is not one of remorse. Not once does he ask for forgiveness, or even to be rescued.<sup>18</sup> However, he does agree to fulfill his prophetic task: *'I will pay that which I have vowed. Salvation belongs to the Lord'* (2:10). Jonah finally admits that man cannot act against God, even if he thinks it might save the Israelite people.

Yet, this complicated story does not end here. Jonah did as he had been told – he did go to Nineveh, he did not act against God's command, but then he held a protest by the city gates. The protest was against God: *'Therefore did I*

*flee to Tarshish, for I knew that Thou art a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abundant in kindness and forgiving of evil* (4:2). Jonah still did not want Nineveh to repent. Its annihilation would have saved the Northern Kingdom. Its continued success might mean (and eventually did mean) the end of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. However, God's answer was: *'Shall I not be concerned for Nineveh that great city in which more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons reside'* (4:11). God cannot judge the Assyrians by the future but only by the present, since human beings have free will to act or to change their actions. Just as Nineveh could repent, so could Israel.

The midrash explains by contrasting three prophets:

Elijah demanded the honor of the father [God] but not the son [Israel] . . . as it says: *I was jealous for the God of Israel* (I Kg. 19:10). Jonah demanded honor for the son and not the father as it says: *and Jonah got up and ran off to Tarshish from the face of God* (Jon. 1:3). Jeremiah demanded the honor of the father and the son as it says: *we have sinned and rebelled you have not forgiven* (Lam. 3:42).<sup>19</sup>

Jonah loved the son (the Israelite people) so he was willing to rebel against the father (God) and sacrifice his life in order to save them.

#### JONAH AND ELIJAH – UNDERSTANDING A DIFFICULT MIDRASH

Despite the previous midrash contrasting Jonah and Elijah there are actually many similarities between them.<sup>20</sup> Elijah had an interestingly ambiguous relationship with Ahab, King of Israel. Ahab was a wicked king (I Kg. 16:30) who brought Divine wrath upon his kingdom. Elijah told him that his actions would be punished by a drought (I Kg. 17:1). However, after the showdown on Mount Carmel with the priests of the baal, Elijah won over the allegiance of the people, and feeling that Ahab too was impressed, he ran in front of the King's chariot to honor him (I Kg. 18:46).

After Jezebel threatened Elijah, he felt that his mission was a failure and ran off to the desert, as Jonah ran off to Tarshish. In the desert God appeared to Elijah, and the prophet exclaimed, *'For the children of Israel have left Your covenant, destroyed Your altar and killed Your prophets by the sword and I alone am left and they seek my life as well'* (I Kg. 19:14). After his failure with the people and the king, Elijah had given up. God then told Elijah to appoint Elisha the prophet in his place (I Kg. 19:15). The prophet's task is to

defend the Israelite people. If Elijah could not defend them, he had to be replaced. Jonah had a love for the children of Israel both when they were good and when they were bad. In that sense he stands in contrast to Elijah. "Rabbi Eliezer taught: Jonah the son of Amittai was the son of the widow from Zarephat, the boy that Elijah resuscitated."<sup>21</sup> "Therefore he was called Ben Amittai as it says [about Elijah] the word of God on your lips is true [*emet*] (I Kg. 17:24)."<sup>22</sup> Elijah's uncompromising attachment to truth made him detach himself from the Israelite people after he felt that he had failed to win them over to true monotheism. This attribute of judgment, referred to by the mystics as the unbending truth, is symbolized in Elijah's ascending to heaven in a chariot of fire. But the text says *God is not in the fire* (I Kg. 19:12).<sup>23</sup> Jonah, the spiritual son of Elijah, redeems Elijah by learning unconditional love for his people. He defends them at all costs and is more than willing to give his life for them. In the end, he cannot overrule God's decision even if he knows that the probable outcome will be historically disastrous for his people.

## NOTES

1. This twofold story of sin and *teshuvah* would explain why the Book of Jonah is read as part of the afternoon service on Yom Kippur. Looking at it this way, we see messages both in the personal story of Jonah and in the collective story of the people of Nineveh.
2. This is an idea I heard.
3. Tanhuma, Tzav: 14.
4. "Jonah's wife would make the pilgrimage [to Jerusalem] on the [three] holy days and the sages did not reproach her [for this]" Eruvin 96a.
5. Tanhuma Tzav: 14, Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 10, Jerusalem 1852, 24a.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. Eruvin 96a.
9. Sukkah 50b.
10. Jerusalem Talmud, Sukkah 5:1.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. W. F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1968) p. 41, and idem in J. B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950) p. 321. Elias Bickerman, in *Four Strange Books of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967) p. 29, writes that the Book of Jonah was composed after 612, since it says "Nineveh was a great city" (Jon. 3:3). He placed the writing in the fifth century, under Persian rule. The Talmud gives the authorship to the Men of the Great Assembly which would also be around that time frame. However the story is set in the time of Jeroboam II.

14. As you enter the first floor of the British Museum, on display you can see the gates of Nineveh, capital of Assyria from just after this time period.
15. There is an opinion that Jonah boarded the ship in order to drown, quoted in Bickerman, p. 16.
16. Mekhilta Ptihta, Parashat Bo.
17. Kuzari 2:4.
18. Bickerman points out that many Greek and Latin translators had a problem with Jonah not asking to be rescued. Jerome noticed it and some of the translators put the text in the past tense. Even Flavius Josephus writes that this psalm of Jonah must have been said after he was spit onto the soil. Philo actually substitutes a supplication instead of the psalm (Bickerman, p. 12).
19. Avot de Rabbi Nathan 47.
20. See J. Bachrach, "Yonah Ben Amitai ve-Eliyahu," (Jerusalem: Jewish Agency Press, 1977), pp. 106-168.
21. Pirkei De Rabbi Eliezer 33, JT Sukkah, Chapter 5.
22. Zohar II Shmot 197a.



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