

Bellows Family

MATAN AL HAPEREK

The Six-Year Online Weekly | Tanakh Learning Program

Sefer Yonah is one of the books of Trei-Asar, but unlike the rest of the books in Trei-Asar which are essentially books of prophecy, in Sefer Yonah the focus is on the story of the prophet who runs away. In fact, one could say that Sefer Yonah mostly deals with the relationship of the prophet to God and with the special status of the prophet. Another unique aspect of Sefer Yonah which distinguishes it from the rest of the books of prophets is that it speaks of a prophecy which is dedicated to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, and does not mention Israel at all. The Radak wondered about this in his introduction to Sefer Yonah: "And one must ask why this prophecy was included in the holy writings when it is all about Nineveh which was a gentile city and no mention is made of Israel, and there is no other book in the prophets like this." The book is comprised of four perakim with a chiasmic structure. While learning it we will examine parallels between the perakim which will help us to understand the overall significance of the book.

Perek 1

The perek opens with an introduction (1-3), which describes Yonah's mission and how he runs away from it, and includes the central question of the book: why does Yonah evade his mission to prophesy to Nineveh and decide to run away from God? The text does not give any explanation in the beginning of the book, and only toward the end we find an allusion to the reason. In the continuation of the perek we are told how Yonah's plan to run away from God goes awry, and God chases him into the ocean using his messengers – the storm and the fish.

1.

"And Yonah arose to flee to Tarshish from before the Lord" (3)

Yonah decides to flee from God. This desertion raises a major difficulty – how does a prophet think that he can do such a thing? Why specifically to Tarshish? See the **Ibn Ezra**. On what

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distinction in the text is his understanding based? How does he explain Yonah's flight based on this distinction?

One must wonder how one who is intelligent, who knew God and His ways, could think to flee from Him who fills the world with His glory? And how can he prophesy in the name of God, as it says he is a prophet...And when I looked through the Tanakh I saw that the word to flee does not appear without the word *pnei*, like in the case of “*and where shall I flee from Your presence (mipanecha)?*” (Tehillim 139:7) or “*And Yiftach fled from (mipnei) his brothers*” (Shoftim 11:3). However in Yonah he does not flee from God (*mipnei*), but rather from before God (*milifnei*). And it is written (in the story of Eliyahu) “*As the Lord, the God of Israel, before whom (lifanav) I stand, lives, there shall not be dew or rain these years, but according to my word.*” (Melachim I 17:1) So we see that when a person has a task as a messenger from God he is *lifnei*, as we see as well in the story of Cain, “*And Cain went out from the presence of the Lord (milifnei)*” (Bereshit 4:16). In contrast it says about Cain “*and from your face (mipanecha) I shall be hid*” (Bereshit 4:14), for all of the Land of Israel is before God.

2.

Compare God's command to Yonah's reaction. Pay attention to the contrast between the word “arise” in the commandment (2) and in the execution in pasuk 3. Follow Yonah's movements, which all begin with a form of “went down” (*vayered*). What is the meaning of this trend?

3.

In response to Yonah's going down, God reacts with a strong wind on the sea. Examine the reactions of the sailors, and in contrast, Yonah's reaction (5). What view is represented by each of them? Note the similarity between the word *vayeradem* (fell asleep) and *vayered* (went down). What does Yonah's falling asleep signify at this point in the story? Note also the ship's captain's rebuke of Yonah (6) and the way it echoes God's words in pasuk 2.

4.

Throughout the perek Yonah, the prophet of God, is contrasted with the gentile sailors who are led by the ship's captain. Follow the progression of the sailors in the perek from a religious-ethical viewpoint: focus on the fear of the sailors in pesukim 5, 10 and 16: What is the reason for the fear in each place and what does it cause? Compare also their cry to God (14) to the lack of such a cry by Yonah (2). How is this process a reversal of the process which Yonah undergoes in our perek in his relationship to God and man?

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Perek 2

After the series of “going down” by Yonah in perek 1, which brings him to the depths of the sea, Yonah is trapped in the belly of a fish. In the middle of perek 2 we find Yonah’s prayer to God from the belly of the fish. This prayer is a turning point in the plot, and represents Yonah’s return to God.

5.

“...and Yonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights. And Yonah prayed to the Lord his God, from the belly of the fish.” (1-2)

During the three days which Yonah spends in the belly of the fish he changes his ways.

a. If we know that Yonah preferred to drown and die and not call out to God, why did the stay in the belly of the fish affect him? To understand the meaning of this stage of Yonah’s flight see the description in Tehillim 139:7-10 which is appropriate to Yonah’s journey.

b. The unique situation of Yonah being found specifically in the belly of a fish adds another level of understanding. What does this symbolize for Yonah? Use the **Malbim**:

God brought a large fish to that exact point which swallowed him whole, without breaking any bones, and we know that man cannot survive in a fish for even one hour, that man needs fresh air from outside. However, perhaps as he was already destined to die it was as if he was reborn, so that he was like a fetus which exists for 9 months in his mother’s belly, without breathing air.

6.

The difficulty with Yonah’s prayer is the incongruity between his speaking of his salvation as something that already happened, while he is presently in the belly of the fish.


a. See the following commentaries. How does each one solve the difficulty?

Rashi: *And I said* – When you threw me into the sea I was as dead, and *I was driven away from before Your eyes*”.

Indeed – I saw that you kept me alive for all these days and I knew, “*I will continue to gaze upon Your Holy Temple.*”

Ibn Ezra: *And Yonah prayed* – the commentators wished to give a new interpretation and did not follow the simple meaning of the words. Yonah only prayed after he came out to dry land, about being rescued from the belly of the fish and therefore it says *from the belly of the fish* and not *in the belly of the fish* ... And now note that all prayers and blessings of a prophet come through the spirit of prophecy as Yaakov said, *which I took from the hand of the Amorite* (Bereshit 48:22), because a thing which is destined to be is spoken of in the past tense.

b. In light of what he did in the previous perek, what central point is missing in Yonah’s statement to God? How does this explain God’s reaction at the end of the perek, “*And the Lord said to the fish, and it spewed Yonah onto the dry land.*”

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Yonah 1-2

7.

Yonah describes the drowning and the salvation twice in the prayer: in pesukim 4-5 and 6-7. Note the similarities in the descriptions and the language. From what perspective is each description given? Note the role of God in each description and the stages of drowning in the second description. What is the double meaning of drowning which we see here?

APPENDIX



Yonah in the belly of the fish, Israeli stamp 1964

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