

Bellows Family

MATAN AL HAPEREK

The Six-Year Online Weekly | Tanakh Learning Program

Perek 3

After Yonah's "rebirth" upon his leaving the belly of the fish, Yonah starts out again on his mission. The perek opens with an additional commandment to Yonah (1-2). This time Yonah fulfills the commandment (3-4), and his prophecy bears fruit – the people of Nineveh repent (5-9) and the decree is cancelled (10). The significance of the perek becomes clear when we compare it to the first mission and its results in perek 1.

1.

At the heart of the perek is a description of the repentance of the people of Nineveh, which is described at length and with great detail.

a. The repentance of the people of Nineveh is described in pasuk 5. What are the characteristics of this unique response and what it is intended to highlight?

b. From the description of the actions of the simple people the text turns to the actions of the king (6-7). Follow the four actions which the king takes and discuss the connection between them. How does the king change the nature of the public fast? What aspect is added by his words and what is its significance?

c. In pasuk 10 God's reaction to the repentance of the people of Nineveh is described. Read the pasuk carefully – to which aspect of the people's actions is he relating?

See the **Mishna in Taanit 2:1** –

...The eldest among them shall then address them in heart-moving terms: "My brethren, consider that it is not written in respect to [the repentance of] the Ninevites, that God regarded their having wrapped themselves in sackcloth, and considered their fast-days, but that *'God saw their acts, and that they had turned from their evil ways'* (Yonah 3:10), and the tradition of the prophets also is, *'Tear your hearts, and not your garments'* (Yoel 2:13)."

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2.

a. The repentance of the people of Nineveh parallels the repentance of the sailors in perek 1: note the similarities between the two situations. The fact that the king rises and subjugates himself to God's word is the reverse of Yonah's rising in perek 1, and parallels the role of the ship's captain. Follow the relationship of the two leaders' actions and those of the masses. What religious viewpoint is expressed in the uncertain language used in the two perakim (1:6, 3:9)?

b. How are the actions different in each perek? How is Yonah the vehicle of salvation in both cases, and how is that connected to the reason for danger in each case?

3.

The underlying story to our story is the story of the destruction of Sodom. Yonah says to the people of Nineveh: *"In another forty days Nineveh shall be **overturned!**"* This punishment is only given to an entire city in the story of Sodom. In addition, God's statement in perek 1 about Nineveh: *"for their evil has come before Me"* is similar to what is said when the cries of Sodom reach God. How does this similarity emphasize the difference between Avraham's role as a prophet (Bereshit 18:20-33) and Yonah's role as a prophet? (Note that neither of the prophets receives God's word submissively!) In contrast, how does this emphasize the difference of the response of the people of Nineveh to the prophecy of Yonah from the response of the people of Sodom to the messengers from God?

Perek 4

It would seem that perek 3 is the end and the resolution of the story – the city is saved from being overturned and the mission is successful. However, having the climax of the story in perek 4 teaches us that the focus of the book is not the repentance of Nineveh, but rather the character of Yonah. While the previous perakim spoke of unilateral actions, without dialogue, this perek begins with a dialogue between Yonah and God in the city (1-4), and afterward continues to a dialogue between Yonah and God outside the city (5-11).

4.

After his long silence in the previous perakim, Yonah reveals for the first time what he is thinking and the reason for his flight from before God. However, even here the reason for his flight is unclear. See the following two commentaries and discuss the reason for Yonah's opposition to the repentance of the people of Nineveh according to each.

a. Rashi: *Now it displeased Yonah* – he said, "Now the gentiles will say that I am a false prophet."

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was this not my contention- I know that if they repent, you will not destroy (Nineveh) and I will appear to be a liar.

b. Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 11:5: Rabbi Yonah said Yonah ben Amitai was a true prophet. We find that at the time that the Holy One Blessed be He told him to “Arise, go to Nineveh” (Yonah 1:2), Yonah said “I know that these gentiles are close to repentance, and lo, I shall go and prophesy against them, and they shall repent, and the Holy One, blessed be He, consequently will come and inflict punishment on those who hate Israel (meaning on Israel itself). So what should I do? (I have no choice but to) flee.”

See also the interesting addition of the **Ibn Ezra** in his comparison to Moshe and Elisha, who lived around the same time as Yonah, and according to the midrash was his Rabbi: “Because he saw that Israel did not repent, he was afraid that evil would come to them, therefore he prayed for God to take his soul, in a way similar to (Moshe who said) “*erase me now*” (Shemot 32:32) and Elisha who anointed Chazael.

5.

See the harsh words of Yonah in pesukim 1-3. Follow the series of three “evils” - two at the end of perek 3 (pasuk 10) and one in the words of Yonah (4:1) - which evolve one from the other. What is the association between the different evils? Pay attention to the difference between the evil of Yonah and the evils which came before it. Based on this, explain why Yonah prefers to die (3), and how this could explain his stubborn resistance.


6.

In pesukim 5-11 we have a second dialogue between God and Yonah. There is a clear parallel between the first dialogue and the second in both structure and style: evil, wanting to die, the reaction of God. However, while the first dialogue reflects Yonah’s viewpoint, the second dialogue reflects God’s answer to Yonah. What is the evil which bothers Yonah in both cases? Pay attention as well to the addition in God’s response to Yonah the second time (see pesukim 4 and 9). Note the nature of the request to die in both cases. What do you think is the reason for the differences?

7.

“And His mercy is on all His creations”

God’s answer to Yonah, which ends the perek and the entire book, is the apex of the book and in it a lesson is learned from the plant, but the lesson is unclear. Try to explain it in terms of the dispute between Yonah and God on the question of the source and purpose of repentance

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in the world. Compare the quote of the attributes of God by Yonah (2) to their source at the revelation of God to Moshe (Shemot 34:6-7). Pay attention to the differences between the “leading attributes” for Yonah and for God.

APPENDIX – The Repentance of the People of Nineveh and the Jewish-Christian Polemic, E. Urbach

In our rabbinic sources we find an ambivalent attitude to the repentance of the people of Nineveh. It says in the **Mishna in Taanit 2:1** –

...The eldest among them shall then address them in heart-moving terms: “My brethren, consider that it is not written in respect to [the repentance of] the Ninevites, that God regarded their having wrapped themselves in sackcloth, and considered their fast-days, but that *‘God saw their acts, and that they had turned from their evil ways’* (Yonah 3:10), and the tradition of the prophets also is, *‘Tear your hearts, and not your garments’* (Yoel 2:13).”

A positive reference is made to the repentance of the people of Nineveh in the Talmud Bavli as well (Taanit 16a):

Let them turn everyone from his evil way and from the violence that is in their hands. What is the meaning of, ‘From the violence that is in their hands’? — Shmuel said: Even if one had stolen a beam and built it into his castle he should raze the entire castle to the ground and return the beam to its owner.

A different attitude is found to the repentance of the people of Nineveh in the Israeli sources. In the Talmud Yerushalmi (Taanit) we find:

Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: The repentance of the people of Nineveh was one of deception. What did they do? R Huna said in the name of R Shimon Chalputa: “They set up calves inside, with the mothers outside, lambs inside, with the mothers outside, and these bellowed from here, and those bellowed from there. They said, ‘If we are not shown mercy, we shall not have mercy on them.’... “...*let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence which is in his hands*” (Yonah 3:8). Said R Yochanan, “What they had in their hands they gave back, but what they had hidden in chests, boxes and cupboards, they did not give back.”

The aggadic masters in the Land of Israel emphasized the negative sides of the repentance of the people of Nineveh. In their opinion this was a fraudulent, insolent repentance and not an appropriate, complete repentance. This opinion contrasts the opinion of the Mishnah which saw their repentance as setting an example for all times. What caused the scholars of Israel in the second half of the third century to ignore the Mishnah while their counterparts in Babylonia continued to reinforce it and expand on it? It must be that there is an important reason for this change in attitude. There must be a reason for downplaying the nature of the repentance of the people of Nineveh which is directed at another party who was particularly interested in increasing the importance and honor of this opinion. In the gospels of the New Testament the repentance of the people of Nineveh serves as a rebuke to Israel:

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The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Yonah, and behold, something greater than Yonah is here.

We find a similar rebuke in the Midrash:

[Why is it called] 'ha-ir ha-yonah'? They should have learned from the city of Yonah, Ninveh. One single prophet I sent to Ninveh and they repented; how many prophets did I send to Israel, in Jerusalem? ... Since they did not listen, they were exiled, and when they were exiled, Yirmiyahu began to lament over them: 'How the city dwells alone.'" (Midrash Eichah, Introduction, chapter 31)

The Christian explanation took the Jewish Midrash, which is apparently the older tradition, and adapted it for its own use. Yonah's flight is explained as an attempt to evade the comparison between Nineveh and Israel, and as an act of sacrifice on Yonah's part in order not to incriminate Israel.

Yonah said thus, I will leave the land of Israel to a place where the Divine spirit is not revealed, for the gentiles are close to repentance and I do not want Israel to be deficient, etc. R. Natan said: It was Yonah's intention to die in the sea, as it says, *And he said to them, "Pick me up and cast me into the sea"*. Similarly, we find in the case of other forefathers and prophets that they gave up their lives for Israel..." Moshe says, *"And now, if You forgive their sin, But if not, erase me now from Your book, which You have written."* (Shemot 32:32). Yonah fled from "before God" and "demanded the respect of the son and not the father" in order to save Israel. (Yalkut Shimoni, 550)

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