

Jonah: Worst Prophet Ever?

Source Sheet by Rabbi Debbie Young-Somers – No Beer Still a Shiur



Jonah 4:2

(2) He prayed to the Eternal, saying, "O Eternal! Isn't this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment.

יונה ד':ב'

(ב) וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל אֶל־ה' וַיֹּאמֶר אָנָּה ה'
הֲלוֹא־נֵאָדָּבְרִי עַד־הַיּוֹתֵי עַל־אֲדָמָתִי
עַל־כֵּן קִדַּמְתִּי לְבָרֶחַ תַּרְשִׁישָׁה כִּי
יָדַעְתִּי כִּי אַתָּה אֱלֹהִים חַנּוּן וְרַחוּם אַרְךָ
אֲפִים וְרַב־חֶסֶד וְנָתַם עַל־הָרָעָה:



Jonah 4

יונה ד'

(1) This displeased Jonah greatly, and he was grieved. (2) He prayed to the Eternal, saying, "O God! Isn't this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment. (3) Please, Eternal, take my life, for I would rather die than live." (4) The Eternal replied, "Are you that deeply grieved?" (5) Now Jonah had left the city and found a place east of the city. He made a booth there and sat under it in the shade, until he should see what happened to the city. (6) The Eternal God provided a ricinus plant, which grew up over Jonah, to provide shade for his head and save him from discomfort. Jonah was very happy about the plant. (7) But the next day at dawn God provided a worm, which attacked the plant so that it withered. (8) And when the sun rose,

(א) וַיִּרַע אֶל-יוֹנָה רָעָה גְדוֹלָה וַיִּחַר לוֹ: (ב) וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל אֶל-ה' וַיֹּאמֶר אָנֹכָה ה' הֲלוֹא-אָנֹכָה דְבָרִי עַד-הָיִיתִי עַל-אֲדָמְתִי עַל-כֵּן קִדַּמְתִּי לְבָרְחָם תַּרְשִׁישָׁה כִּי יָדַעְתִּי כִּי אַתָּה אֱלֹהֵי-חַיִּים וְרַחוּם אַרְךָ אַפְיִם וְרַב-חַסְדֶּךָ וְנִחָם עַל-הָרָעָה: (ג) וְעַתָּה ה' קַח-נָא אֶת-נַפְשִׁי מִמָּוֶי כִּי טוֹב מוֹתִי מִחַיִּי: {פ} (ד) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' הֲהִיטֵב חָרָה לָךְ: (ה) וַיֵּצֵא יוֹנָה מִן-הָעִיר וַיֵּשֶׁב מִקְנָדָם לָעִיר וַיַּעַשׂ לוֹ שָׁם סֹכָה וַיֵּשֶׁב תַּחְתֶּיהָ בַּצֵּל עַד אֲשֶׁר יֵרְאֶה מָה-יְהִי בָּעִיר: (ו) וַיִּמְן יְהוָה-אֱלֹקִים קִיקְיֹון וַיַּעַל מַעַל לְיוֹנָה לְהַיִּיתָ צֶלֶל עַל-רֹאשׁוֹ לְהַצִּיל לוֹ מִרְעַתוֹ וַיִּשְׂמַח יוֹנָה עַל-הַקִּיקְיֹון שִׂמְחָה גְדוֹלָה: (ז) וַיִּמְן הָאֱלֹקִים תּוֹלְעַת בַּעֲלֹת הַשָּׂחַר לְמַחֲרַת וַתֵּךְ אֶת-הַקִּיקְיֹון וַיִּיבֹשׁ: (ח) וַיְהִי כַּזָּרֵחַ הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וַיִּמְן אֱלֹקִים רוּחַ קָדִים חָרִישִׁית וַתֵּךְ הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ עַל-רֹאשׁ יוֹנָה וַיִּתְעַלֶּף וַיִּשְׂאֵל אֶת-נַפְשׁוֹ לְמוֹת וַיֹּאמֶר טוֹב מוֹתִי מִחַיִּי: (ט) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים אֶל-יוֹנָה הֲהִיטֵב חָרָה-לָךְ עַל-הַקִּיקְיֹון וַיֹּאמֶר הִיטֵב



God provided a sultry east wind; the sun beat down on Jonah's head, and he became faint. He begged for death, saying, "I would rather die than live." (9) Then God said to Jonah, "Are you so deeply grieved about the plant?" "Yes," he replied, "so deeply that I want to die." (10) Then the LORD said: "You cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. (11) And should not I care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well!"

חָרָה לִי עַד־מָוֹת: (י) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶתְהָה
חֹסֶתָ עַל־הַקִּיקְיוֹן אֲשֶׁר לֹא־עָמְלָתָ
בּוֹ וְלֹא גִדַּלְתָּו שָׁבֹן־לֵילָה הָיָה וּבֹן־
לֵילָה אָבָד: (יא) וַאֲנִי לֹא אַחֹוס עַל־
נִינְוָה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה אֲשֶׁר יֵשְׁבֶיהָ
הֲרַבָּה מִשְׁתִּים־עֶשְׂרֵה רְבֹו אָדָם
אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָדַע בֵּין־יְמִינֹו לְשִׁמְאֹלֹו
וּבִהְמָה רַבָּה:

The Book of Jonah and The Days of Awe, Professor Jeffrey H. Tigay

The oldest Jewish interpretation of the book holds that Jonah fled because he wished to protect his credibility. Since the Ninevites were sure to be forgiven, Jonah, who was to predict their doom, would look like a false prophet.¹⁰ A variation on this view holds that it was God's credibility that Jonah sought to protect. God's willingness to forgive and forget would destroy the fear of God; His word would become a mockery and men's trust in Him would be shaken if

His threats were so easily evaded.¹¹ The book does raise this problem. The divine threat is phrased in absolute terms; even a date is set. Yet after forty days Nineveh remains standing...

...This is a view of prophecy that Jonah apparently did not share. He was a member of the old school. The Book of Deuteronomy had defined a simple test for the truth of a prophet:

If the prophet speaks in the name of the Lord and the oracle does not come true, that oracle was not spoken by the Lord; the prophet has uttered it presumptuously.... (Deuteronomy 18:22)

Under this conception the job of prophecy seems simple: Speak what God tells you and you will always be proved right. History is intelligible, God's word always comes to pass, and the prophet is a celebrity. But how tragic is the new conception! Speak what God tells you, but speak it so effectively that the people will be moved to change their ways and thus obviate your dire prediction (cf. Jer. 26:18-19). If your reputation suffers in the process-that's a small price to pay for what you will have accomplished!

To begin with, Jonah is an unlikely prophet, indeed a recalcitrant one. In the first lines of the story, he is asked by God to go to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. But since the Assyrian Empire is the great enemy of Israel, Jonah decides, in essence, to say no to God. Already the comedy is apparent. God could not have been clearer in his call to Jonah: "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." And Jonah couldn't be any clearer in his opposition to God. In order to avoid his prophetic mission he boards a ship bound for Tarshish, in the opposite direction from Nineveh. (More comedy: Nineveh would be reached by land. Taking a ship is a clear sign of Jonah's response to God: "No!")

[...]

An exceedingly patient God then gives the poorly performing prophet another message. It is basically the same as the first one, which Jonah had ignored: "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city

[in case he forgot which city], and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” Grudgingly, Jonah journeys to Nineveh, where he simply spits out the message, much as the fish spat him out, with little ardor: “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” And then—surprise!—the words of Jonah, the lousy prophet, are astonishingly effective. The entire city virtually leaps into penitential action. Few prophets have had such success. When the Assyrian king hears the news of Jonah’s prophecy, he promptly strips off his robe, covers himself in sackcloth and ashes, and orders all the Ninevites to don sackcloth as well—including the animals. (The image of the “sinful” Ninevite cows repenting for their bovine sins is wonderfully comic: “Forgive us, Lord! We have eaten too much grass! In this great city!”) Seeing the repentance of all the living, God relents from his punishment. Nineveh is saved. More humor: Jonah is furious! Apparently, he had preached the same message in his own country to no avail. Why do the Ninevites listen when his own people do not? Or perhaps Jonah is angry that God’s terrible wrath did not come upon his enemies. So Jonah does what any petulant prophet would do—he asks the Lord to kill him. “Please take my life from me,” he says. God says, bluntly, “Is it right for you to be angry?” Apparently, even the all-knowing God has a hard time understanding Jonah. Now Jonah pouts. Or sulks, as one commentator suggested. Venturing east of the city, to a sunny spot, he constructs a “booth” (for shade) and waits to see what else will happen to the hated Ninevites. (At times, Jonah sounds like a sports fan whose team has lost the World Series; he hates the other city for its ridiculous good fortune.) An incredibly patient God takes pity on his reluctant prophet

Martin, James. *Between Heaven and Mirth* (pp. 39-41). HarperOne. Kindle Edition.