

The Steinsaltz Nevi'im

Introduction to Jonah

The book of Jonah is unique among the Minor Prophets in that it does not focus on Jonah's actual prophecies, but rather on a series of events that befell him. For this reason, the book opens without an introductory phrase, such as: "The vision of Jonah", or: "The burden of Jonah", instead immediately commencing with his story.

The book of Kings mentions a "Jonah, son of Amitai, the prophet, who was from Gat Hefer"¹, a place situated in the inheritance of Zebulun². It would therefore seem that Jonah prophesied in the kingdom of Israel during the period of Yerovam II.

The book of Jonah resembles other books of the Bible in that it gives expression to the glory of God and His unlimited power, as well as to a prophecy's ability to relate to distant, foreign nations. However, it differs greatly from the other books of the Prophets in the strong presence of the prophet himself. Generally, the personality of a prophet is secondary to the content of his statements. Even when biographical details of a prophet are provided, such as in the books of Ezekiel and Isaiah, it is not sufficient to clearly sketch the prophet's character.

By contrast, the book of Jonah deals with Jonah's personal misgivings, troubles, and angst as he faces God and comes to terms with the prophecy he has been instructed to deliver. Although Jonah, like all prophets, is an instrument in the hand of God, the book indirectly criticizes him for his actions, which are motivated by personal concerns for his status and reputation. Indeed, Jonah is the tragic figure of this book.

Note to the reader: this excerpt from the forthcoming edition of the Steinsaltz Tanakh contains the Name of God in print. While we invite you to download or print it, please do treat it with due care.

The Book of Jonah

Jonah 1 – Jonah Flees on a Ship

Jonah is sent to prophesy in the large and distant city of Nineveh, but for an unspecified reason he reacts by fleeing from God on a ship. Early in his trip he falls asleep in the bowels of the ship, but God does not grant him refuge there. Instead, He brings a storm upon the ship and causes the prophet to be tossed into the sea. At this point in the story, Jonah is portrayed as determined, reasonable, and calm. However, as the narrative develops, other aspects of his personality come to the fore.

1:1 The word of the Lord was with Jonah son of Amitai, saying:

וַיְהִי דְבַר יְהוָה אֶל-יוֹנָה בֶן-אֲמִתַּי לֵאמֹר:

2 Rise, go to Nineveh,^{b1} the great city, the capital of Assyria, and proclaim against it a certain message, even if you do not speak the language of the Assyrians. If people want to hear the message of a prophet, they will understand it even if they are unfamiliar with all the intricacies of his language. I am sending you to them, **as their evildoing has arisen before Me**, and they will face retribution. You must warn them and call upon them to return from their evil ways.

קוּם לֶךְ אֶל-נִיְנִוֶה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה וְקְרָא עֲלֵיהֶם
בְּיַעֲלֹתָהּ רָעָתָם לְפָנָי:

Background:

b1 Nineveh: Nineveh was the capital of Assyria. In Jonah's time, Assyria was a distant kingdom whose contact with the nation of Israel was not yet significant. Nevertheless, since at that time Assyria had begun to strengthen and expand its borders, the kingdom of Judah turned to it for assistance. When the king of Aram attacked Judah, King Ahaz of Judah sent a large sum of money to the king of Assyria so that he would attack the Arameans from the north, thereby causing them to retreat (see II Kings 16:5–9; see also Joel 1:1).

3 Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from before the Lord,^{d1} that is, from the holy Land of Israel.³ Jonah sought to flee to the other end of the world, perhaps to Tartessos on the Iberian Peninsula.⁴ In those days, crossing the length of the Mediterranean Sea was an extremely long journey, and the sea's western end was indeed the edge of the known world. **He went down to Jaffa,** a port city in the Land of Israel,⁵ **and found a ship bound for Tarshish;^{d2} he paid its fare** to sail on the ship,⁶ **and he went down into it.** He boarded the ship, which did not provide him with the most comfortable living quarters, but nonetheless enabled him **to come with them,** the captain and the other passengers, **to Tarshish,** to flee **from before the Lord.** Jonah hoped that the spirit of prophecy would not rest upon him outside the Land of Israel, and that God would therefore leave him alone.⁷ The verse itself does not state the reason for Jonah's refusal to act as God's messenger. The Sages suggest various motivations for his decision.⁸

וַיָּקָם יוֹנָה לִבְרוֹחַ תַּרְשִׁישָׁה מִלְּפָנֵי יְהוָה
וַיֵּרָד יָפוֹ וַיִּמְצָא אֶבְיָה אֶל־בְּנֵי תַרְשִׁישׁ וַיֵּתֵן
שְׂכָרָהּ וַיֵּרָד בָּהּ לָבוֹא עִמָּהֶם תַּרְשִׁישָׁה
מִלְּפָנֵי יְהוָה:

4 But the Lord cast a great wind upon the sea while the ship was sailing, **and there was a great storm in the sea, and the ship,** which was presumably made of wood, **was about to be wrecked.**

וַיְהִי הַטּוֹל רוּחַ־גָּדוֹלָה אֶל־הַיָּם וַיְהִי סִעָר־
גָּדוֹל בַּיָּם וַהֲאֶבְיָה חֲשָׁבָה לְהִשָּׁבֵר:

5 The sailors were afraid, as they felt that they could not be saved by natural means, **and each man cried out to his god;^{d3} and they cast the articles that were on the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them,** so that the ship would not capsize. **But** during this commotion, **Jonah descended to the hold of the ship, and he lay down, and he fell asleep.** The sea was raging, people were shouting, crying, and praying, and yet Jonah went to bed, as though he did not care whether he would live or die. Unlike the other passengers on the ship, who wanted to reach Tarshish for some other purpose such as trade, Jonah boarded that ship only to flee from God. It seems that at that moment he was indifferent to his fate.⁹

וַיִּירָאוּ הַמַּלְחִים וַיִּזְעֻקוּ אִישׁ אֶל־אֱלֹהָיו
וַיִּטְלוּ אֶת־הַבְּרִיּוֹת אֲשֶׁר בְּאֵבֵי אֶל־הַיָּם
לְהַקֵּל מֵעֲלֵיהֶם וַיִּזְנֶה יוֹנָה אֶל־יַרְבֵּיתִי
הַסְּפִינָה וַיִּשְׁכַּב וַיֵּרָדֶם:

Discussion:

d1 To flee to Tarshish from before the Lord: When Jonah was given a prophecy of comfort to deliver to Israel, he did so unhesitatingly, and that prophecy was even fulfilled in his lifetime (II Kings 14:25). However, a prophecy of retribution is meant primarily as a warning about a future punishment, and for that very reason it is not necessarily meant to be fulfilled. Accordingly, some explain that Jonah wanted to escape his mission due to a concern that the inhabitants of Nineveh would indeed listen to him and change their ways, thus causing his prophecy to go unfulfilled. If that were to occur, the people may come to perceive him as one who raised a false alarm. Although a prophet could argue that the retribution was withdrawn precisely because of his warning, he might not always be believed. Thus, he is liable to feel a sense of awkwardness or embarrassment, and even become a source of mockery (see 4:1–2; *Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer* 10).

d2 A ship bound for Tarshish: A journey of this kind posed a substantial challenge even many centuries later. Due to navigational difficulties, seafarers in ancient times would prefer to stay as close to the shore as possible, and they did not dare venture out into the open sea. Furthermore, the unpredictable winds of the Mediterranean Sea meant that many sailors were required to handle the oars of a ship in order to maintain control.

d3 Each man cried out to his god: The sailors operating the ships of maritime nations, such as the Greeks, Philistines, and Phoenicians, were generally not native citizens. Rather, people from different nations would be hired to perform this difficult and dangerous labor; consequently, a single crew would have worshipped a variety of deities. Moreover, within a single polytheistic nation each person had his own patron god – sometimes related to his profession, or other times determined by the family to which he belonged (see Rashi, 1:5).

6 The captain approached him¹⁰ and said to him: What is it with you that you have fallen asleep? Why are you lying in your bed while each of us is calling to his god? Since we do not know which god will help us, **arise, call to your God; perhaps your God will reconsider with regard to us** and He will turn to us, **and we will not perish.** It seems that the shipmaster's appeal had no effect upon Jonah whatsoever. Even after he was awoken from his sleep, Jonah did not hurry to pray.

וַיִּקְרַב אֵלָיו רֵב הַחֵבֶל וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ מַה־לְּךָ נָרְדָּם
קוּם קְרָא אֶל־אֱלֹהֶיךָ אוּלַי יִתְעַשֶׂת הָאֱלֹהִים
לָנוּ וְלֹא נֵאָבֵד:

7 Each man, each of the sailors, said to his counterpart: This storm is not a natural phenomenon; it is certainly the product of a sin that one of us has committed. Therefore, **let us cast lots, that we may discover due to whom this misfortune is upon us. They cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah.**

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל־רֵעֵהוּ לְכוּ וְנִפְּלֵה גֹרָלוֹת
וְנִדְעָה בְּשִׁלְמֵי הָרָעָה הַזֹּאת לָנוּ וְנִפְּלֵה
גֹרָלוֹת וְנִפְּלַה הַגּוּרָל עַל־יוֹנָה:

8 They said to him: Since the lot has fallen upon you, **please tell us, due to whom is this misfortune upon us?** Jonah's identity was not evident from his appearance. Presumably, Jonah brought few belongings on the journey, boarding the ship with only basic provisions. Therefore, the sailors inquired: **What is your labor and from where do you come? What is your country and from what people are you?**

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו הַגִּידֵה־נָא לָנוּ בְּאִשֶׁר לָמִי־
הָרָעָה הַזֹּאת לָנוּ מִה־מְלֹאכְתְּךָ וּמֵאֵין תְּבֹא
מִה אֶרֶץְךָ וּמֵאֵי־מִצְּהָ עִם אָתָּה:

9 He said to them: I am a Hebrew. Perhaps Jonah did not identify himself as an Israelite because his fellow seafarers, who were of various nationalities, were unfamiliar with this term. Instead, he used the more ancient title of Hebrew [*Ivri*], which referred to those who lived to the west of the Euphrates River.¹¹ **And I fear the Lord, God of the heavens, who made not only the heavens, which expresses His splendor and glory, but also the sea and the dry land,** and He therefore controls all that transpires within them.¹²

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵיהֶם עִבְרִי אֲנִי וְאֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי
הַשָּׁמַיִם אֲנִי יְרָא אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה אֶת־הַיָּם וְאֶת־
הַיַּבֶּשֶׁתָּה:

10 The men feared a great fear, and they said to him: If it is indeed true that you fear God, **what is this that you have done** by fleeing from Him? **For the men already knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them** earlier that this was the reason for his journey. Now, at a time of grave danger, and after they gained an understanding of God's great power, his previous statement took on a new meaning for them.

וַיִּירָאוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים יְרָאָה גְדוֹלָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו
מִה־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ כִּי־יָדַעְנוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים כִּי־מִלִּפְנֵי
יְהוָה הוּא בָרַח כִּי הִגִּיד לָהֶם:

11 They said to him: What shall we do to you, that the sea will calm from upon us? For the sea continually grew stormier.

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו מִה־נַּעֲשֶׂה לָּךְ וַיִּשְׁתַּקֵּם הַיָּם
מֵעָלֵינוּ כִּי הַיָּם הוֹלֵךְ וְסוֹעֵר:

12 He said to them, in the same composed manner: Lift me and cast me into the sea, and the sea will calm from upon you, as I know that it is due to me that this great storm is upon you. Since I am to blame for the storm, it is fitting that you toss me from the ship; at least you will save yourselves from the danger.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵיהֶם שָׂאוּ־נִי וְהִטִּילֵנִי אֶל־הַיָּם
וַיִּשְׁתַּקֵּם הַיָּם מֵעָלֵיכֶם כִּי יוֹדַע אֲנִי כִּי בְּשִׁלְי
הַסָּעַר הַגָּדוֹל הַזֶּה עָלֵיכֶם:

13 The men rowed to return to dry land;^{d1} but they could not, for the sea continually grew stormier upon them. Although they were presumably not far from the shore and were perhaps even able to see dry land, they were unable to bring their ship to dry land in the raging storm.

וַיַּחֲתְרוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים לְהָשִׁיב אֶל־הַיַּבֶּשֶׁת וְלֹא
יָכְלוּ כִּי הַיָּם הוֹלֵךְ וְסוֹעֵר עָלֵיהֶם:

Discussion:

d1 The men rowed to return to dry land: Despite Jonah's specific instructions to cast him from the ship, the sailors were hesitant to harm him. Their reluctance may have stemmed from the mutual responsibility that shipmates often feel toward each other, as their lives are dependent on one another. In addition, the fact that the sailors beseeched God (1:6) expresses an adherence to values that extend beyond social mores. Their behavior lends support to the Mishna's statement that most sailors are pious (Mishna *Kiddushin* 4:14). This does not mean that sailors always behave in an exemplary manner; rather, it means that their constant exposure to the powerful forces of nature tends to instill in them a fear of Heaven.

14 The sailors were hesitant about accepting Jonah's suggestion, but they soon realized that they had no other option. **They called to the Lord and they said: Please Lord, please let us not perish, in body or soul, for this man's life, and do not put upon us innocent blood; do not find us guilty of murder; for You, Lord, have done as You desired.**

וַיִּקְרְאוּ אֶל־יְהוָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ אַנְּהָ יְהוָה אֵל־נָא
נִאֲבָדָה בְּנַפְשׁ הָאִישׁ הַזֶּה וְאֶל־תֵּתֵן עָלֵינוּ
דָּם נָקִיא כִּי־אֵתָהּ יְהוָה כְּאִשֶּׁר חִפְצָתָ
עָשִׂיתָ:

15 **They lifted Jonah and cast him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging.** The sea calmed, allowing them to continue to their destination.

וַיִּשְׂאוּ אֶת־יוֹנָה וַיַּטְלוּהוּ אֶל־הַיָּם וַיַּעֲמֵד הַיָּם
מִזְעָפוֹ:

16 **The men feared the Lord with great fear.** As long as the sailors perceived God in the manner of pagans, namely as the God of the heavens, who is appointed over the sun, the moon, and the other heavenly bodies, they did not have a real connection to Him. However, once Jonah explained to them that God rules over the entire world, and after they personally witnessed how He interacted with a single individual, fear of the Lord was awakened in their hearts. **And they slaughtered an offering upon the ship to the Lord, and took vows** to bring additional offerings, which they would fulfill when they reached inhabited land and gained access to animals.

וַיִּירָאוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים יְרֵאָה גְדוֹלָה אֶת־יְהוָה
וַיִּזְבְּחוּ־זֶבַח לַיהוָה וַיִּדְרוּ נְדָרִים:

Jonah 2 – Jonah in the Belly of the Fish

After the sailors ultimately fulfill Jonah's request to cast him from the ship, he finds refuge from the waves of the sea inside a fish. It is in this miraculous manner that he manages to remain alive,¹³ although his stay inside the fish is difficult. Jonah's distress and physical hardship in the belly of the fish lead him to recite a lyrical prayer.

2:1 **The Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the innards of the fish for three days and three nights.**

וַיִּמֶן יְהוָה דָּג גְּדוֹל לִבְלַע אֶת־יוֹנָה וַיְהִי יוֹנָה
בְּמִעֵי הַדָּג שְׁלֹשָׁה יָמִים וּשְׁלֹשָׁה לַיְלוֹת:

2 **Jonah prayed to the Lord, his God, from the innards of the fish.** The use of the feminine term for fish [*daga*] may indicate that it was a female fish, whose body was full of eggs, such that the space inside especially crowded.¹⁴

וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל יוֹנָה אֶל־יְהוָה אֱלֹהָיו מִמִּעֵי הַדָּגָה:

3 **He said: I called from my distress to the Lord, and He answered me,** that is, I am certain that He will answer me. As a prophet, Jonah sensed that his prayers would be answered. **From the belly of the netherworld I cried; You heard my voice.**

וַיֹּאמֶר קְרָאתִי מִצָּרָה לִי אֶל־יְהוָה וַיַּעֲנֵנִי
מִבְטֶן שְׂאוֹל שָׁמַעְתִּי שְׁמַעַתְּ קוֹלִי:

4 **You cast me into the depth, in the heart of the seas, the current surrounded me,** so that I was completely encircled by water; **all Your breakers¹⁵ and Your waves passed over me.**

וַתִּשְׁלִיכֵנִי מִצּוֹלָה בְּלִבְבַי יָמִים וַנְהַר יִסְבְּבֵנִי
כָּל־מִשְׁבָּרָיו וַיִּגְלִיף עָלַי עֲבָרוֹ:

5 **And I said: I am banished and expelled from before Your eyes, yet I remain conscious, and I will therefore continue to look to Your holy Sanctuary** in the heavens and pray.¹⁶

וְאָנֹכִי אֲמֹרְתִי נִגְרַשְׁתִּי מִנֶּגֶד עֵינֶיךָ אָךְ אֹסִיף
לְהֵבִיט אֶל־הַיְכָל קִדְשֶׁךָ:

6 **Water has surrounded me to the soul, the depth has enveloped me; reeds have been wrapped around my head.** I am surrounded by sea plants.

אֶפְפוּנִי מַיִם עַד־נַפְשִׁי תְהוֹם יִסְבְּבֵנִי סוּף
חֲבוּשׁ לְרֹאשִׁי:

7 **I descended to the bases, the foundations, of the mountains on the seabed; the earth, its bars are against me forever.** I am unable to reach my desired destination on dry land, and yet **You took my life up from the pit;** You saved me from destruction, **Lord my God,** and now I beseech You for further deliverance.¹⁷

לְהַצִּיבֵי הָרִים יְרִידְתִּי הָאָרֶץ בְּרַחֲמֶיהָ בַּעֲדִי
לְעוֹלָם וַתַּעַל מִשַּׁחַת תַּיִן יְהוָה אֱלֹהָי:

8 When my soul was afflicted within me and I was tormented,¹⁸ I remembered the Lord; my prayer came to You, to Your holy Sanctuary.

בְּהִתְעַטֵּף עָלַי נַפְשִׁי אֶת־יְהוָה זָכַרְתִּי וַתְּבוֹא אֵלַי תְּפִלָּתִי אֶל־הֵיכַל קִדְשְׁךָ:

9 Adherents of false futilities, the idol worshippers, will abandon their faith,^{d1} their own beliefs.

מִשְׁמֵרִים הַבְּלִי־נְשֹׂא חֲסֵדָם יַעֲזֹבוּ:

10 But unlike the idol worshippers,¹⁹ I will remain faithful to my God despite my troubles and with a voice of thanks will present an offering to You the obligatory thanks offering. If I am delivered from this predicament, that which I have vowed I will pay. Salvation is of the Lord.

וְאֲנִי בְּקוֹל תּוֹדָה אֲזַבְחֶה־לְךָ אֲשֶׁר נְדַרְתִּי אֲשַׁלְמָה יְשׁוּעָתָה לַיהוָה:

11 The Lord told the fish to release Jonah, and it spewed Jonah onto the dry land. The fish did not swallow Jonah as prey. Rather, God sent the fish to protect Jonah in the sea, even though Jonah defied God by suppressing the prophecy given to him. Now, the fish is commanded to vomit out the prophet onto dry land.

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה לְדָג וַיִּקַּח אֶת־יוֹנָה אֶל־הַיַּבֵּשָׁה:

Discussion:

d1 Will abandon their faith: Some commentaries interpret this verse as referring to the sailors who cast Jonah into the sea. These men, who had previously been idol worshippers, were so impressed by the events they witnessed on the ship and by the figure of Jonah that they abandoned their beliefs and their idols. The Sages derive from this verse that these sailors eventually converted and brought offerings to God in the Temple (Radak; *Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer* 10; *Tanḥuma, Vayikra* 8; *Zohar* 2:231).

Jonah 3 – Jonah in Nineveh

It is unknown where Jonah landed when vomited out by the fish. Wherever he was, be it on the shores of the Land of Israel, in Syria, or elsewhere, Jonah stood on dry land. Once he recovers, Jonah is again sent to prophesy to Nineveh. In light of all that he endured when he tried to flee from before God, Jonah now obeys God's command. Moreover, his prophecy is heeded by the people of Nineveh.

3:1 The word of the Lord was with Jonah a second time, saying:

וַיְהִי דְבַר־יְהוָה אֶל־יוֹנָה שֵׁנִית לֵאמֹר:

2 Arise, go to Nineveh, the great city, and proclaim to it the proclamation that I speak to you.²⁰

קוּם לֵךְ אֶל־נִינְוֶה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה וְקִרָא אֵלֶיהָ אֶת־הַקְּרִיאָה אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי דֹבֵר אֵלֶיךָ:

3 Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, in accordance with the word of the Lord. Jonah was cast from the ship somewhere in the Mediterranean Sea. Regardless of the shore upon which he emerged, Jonah was very far from Nineveh. Normally, a journey of such great distance would have taken several months. **Nineveh was an exceptionally great city, a journey of three days.** Since the construction of multistory buildings had not yet developed, the city grew outwards. Its walls stretched 12 km around the city, while the city itself covered an area of roughly 7.5 sq km.

וַיָּקָם יוֹנָה וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶל־נִינְוֶה כַּדְּבַר יְהוָה וַיְנַיֵּה הָיְתָה עִיר־גְּדוֹלָה לַאֱלֹהִים מִהַלֵּךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים:

4 Jonah had begun to enter the city a journey of one day, and he proclaimed his prophecy, and said: **Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.** Although the verse does not specify the reason for the foretold destruction, it may be assumed that Jonah proclaimed that the city was full of sin and iniquity (see 3:8), and that if its inhabitants failed to change their ways, they would suffer the fate of Sodom.²¹ However, since the sins of Nineveh are not the focus of the Book of Jonah, the verse does not specify them.²²

וַיַּחֲלֵ יוֹנָה לְבוֹא בְּעִיר מִהַלֵּךְ יוֹם אֶחָד וַיִּקְרָא וַיֹּאמֶר עוֹד אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם וַיְנַיֵּה שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים:

5 The people of Nineveh believed in God and in the prophecy that Jonah stated in His name;²³ **and they proclaimed a fast**, a day of communal gathering, **and they donned sackcloth**, a coarse, woven garment produced from goat hair and the like, as an expression of mourning and submission, **from their great ones to their small ones**. This was the people's spontaneous reaction; they sought with all their desire to return to God.

וַיֵּאֱמִינוּ אֲנֹשֵׁי נִינְוֶה בְּאֱלֹהִים וַיִּקְרְאוּ צוֹם
וַיִּלְבְּשׁוּ שִׂקְיִם מְגֹדֹלִים וְעַד־קִטְנֵיהֶם:

6 Jonah traversed the streets of the city, and his message reached the ears of all of Nineveh, even the king: **The matter reached the king of Nineveh, and he rose from his throne, removed his magnificent robe from upon him, and covered himself with sackcloth, and sat on the ashes**, another sign of mourning.

וַיֵּגַע הַדְּבָר אֶל־מֶלֶךְ נִינְוֶה וַיָּקָם מִכִּסְאוֹ
וַיַּעֲבֵר אֶדְרֵתוֹ מֵעָלָיו וַיִּכֶס שִׂק וַיִּשָּׁב עַל־
הָאֲפֵר:

7 He had them, his ministers and aides, **summoned, and announced in Nineveh at the behest of the king and his nobles, d1 saying: Man and animal, the cattle and the flocks, shall not taste anything, they, the animals, shall not graze in the fields, and they shall not drink water**. Since the entire city is about to be overthrown, the damage will not be limited to the people alone; therefore, the people should involve all the animals in the effort to avert the catastrophe.

וַיִּזְעַק וַיֹּאמֶר בְּנִינְוֶה מִטַּעַם הַמֶּלֶךְ וּגְדָלָיו
לֵאמֹר הָאָדָם וְהַבְּהֵמָה הַבְּקָר וְהַצֹּאן אֶל־
יִטְעֲמוּ מֵאֹמֶה אֶל־יָרְעוּ וַיְמִים אֶל־יִשְׁתּוּ:

8 They shall cover themselves with sackcloth, man and animal, and shall cry mightily to God with sincere prayer that emanates from the depths of their hearts;²⁴ **and each shall return from his own evil way, and from the villainy that is in their hands**. This is referring to the abuse of power, by which the wealthy force those weaker than them to act in a certain manner.

וַיִּתְכַּסּוּ שִׂקִּים הָאָדָם וְהַבְּהֵמָה וַיִּקְרְאוּ
אֶל־אֱלֹהִים בְּחִזְקָה וַיִּשָּׁבוּ אִישׁ מִדְרָכּוֹ
הָרָעָה וּמִן־הַחַמַּס אֲשֶׁר בְּכַפְיָהֶם:

9 If we amend our ways, **who knows? He may relent, and God may reconsider** what he decreed upon us, **and turn back from His enflamed wrath, and we will not perish**. The inhabitants of the city were shaken by Jonah's call; even the king and his nobles proclaimed a process of repentance that would include all living creatures in Nineveh.

מִי־יֹדַע וַיִּשָּׁב וַיִּנְחַם הָאֱלֹהִים וַיִּשָּׁב מִחֲרוֹן
אָפוֹ וְלֹא נִאֲבָד:

10 God saw their actions, that they relented from their evil way. The verse does not state that God saw their fasting, their signs of mourning, or the proclamations issued by the king and his ministers, but rather that He saw their deeds.²⁵ **And** when God saw that they truly repented from their wickedness, **God reconsidered the harm that He had said He would do to them, and He did not do it**. God did not desire their destruction, but their repentance. Their transformation was instrumental in the annulment of the terrible decree.²⁶

וַיֵּרָא הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת־מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם כִּי־שָׁבוּ
מִדְרָכָם הָרָעָה וַיִּנְחַם הָאֱלֹהִים עַל־הָרָעָה
אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר לַעֲשׂוֹת־לָהֶם וְלֹא עָשָׂה:

Discussion:

d1 At the behest of the king and his nobles: The fact that the decree was issued by the king and his ministers indicates that the government of Nineveh was not an absolute monarchy.

Jonah 4 – Jonah and the Castor-Oil Plant

One might view the previous section as having ended with Jonah's greatest achievement as a prophet. Some Biblical characters attempted to correct the corrupt attitudes of others but were unsuccessful: Noah likely rebuked his community before the flood, with no effect; Lot reprimanded the wicked people of Sodom, but they ignored him. By contrast, Jonah's words sent great shockwaves through Nineveh, and its residents were unusually attentive to Jonah's prophecy. Ultimately, the great city of Nineveh was overthrown, just as Jonah prophesied; not in the physical sense, but rather in the form of moral upheaval, as its citizens underwent a profound transformation in their way of life.²⁷

Therefore, Jonah's morose response to the success of his mission is rather surprising. Whereas other prophets of catastrophe expressed pain and misery when their harsh prophecies came to pass,²⁸ Jonah is upset by the annulment of his prophecy. One might consider Jonah's dismay to be an extension of his initial decision to flee from his prophetic mission, a decision motivated by his frustration with the tragic lot of the prophet, whose very success causes him to be mocked.

Ironically, while the book of Jonah deals with repentance, and demonstrates the power of repentance through the actions of Nineveh's people, it is ultimately the prophet Jonah who is not transformed. Even after he accepts God's decree and proclaims to the people of Nineveh what is demanded of him, his character and his personal stance remain unchanged.

4:1 Jonah was displeased with great displeasure because his prophecy of catastrophe did not materialize, **and he was upset.**

וַיִּרַע אֱלֹהֵי יוֹנָה רָעָה גְדוֹלָה וַיִּחַר לוֹ:

2 Consequently, **he prayed to the Lord, and said: Please, Lord, is this not what I had said while I was in my own land? Because of this I initially fled to Tarshish, as I knew that You are God, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in kindness, and reconsidering of harm.**

וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל אֶל־יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר אָנֹכִי יְהוָה הֲלוֹאֲנִי דִבַּרְתִּי עַד־הַיּוֹתַי עַל־אֲדָמָתִי עַל־כֵּן קָדַמְתִּי לְבָרֶךְ תַּרְשִׁישָׁה כִּי יָדַעְתִּי כִּי אַתָּה אֱלֹהֵי חַיָּו וּרְחוּם אַרְךָ אַפַּיִם וְרַב־חַסֵּד וְנָחֵם עַל־הָרָעָה:

3 Now, Lord, please take my life from me, as my death is better than my life if, after warning that the city would be overturned, nothing occurs, since I will be regarded as a liar.

וַעֲתָה יְהוָה קַח־נָא אֶת־נַפְשִׁי מִמֶּנִּי כִּי טוֹב מוֹתִי מַחְיִי:

4 The Lord said: Are you really so upset? Evidently, the turn of events has upset you deeply.

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה הֲהֵיטֵב תִּרְהַ לְךָ:

5 Jonah emerged from the city, and sat east of the city of Nineveh, which lies in an area that is extremely hot for most of the year. He made himself a booth there, and he sat beneath it in the shade, until he could see what would be in the city. He wanted to see whether the city would be destroyed after all.²⁹

וַיֵּצֵא יוֹנָה מִן־הָעִיר וַיֵּשֶׁב מִקֶּדֶם לְעִיר וַיַּעֲשֵׂ לֹו שֵׁם סֹכָה וַיֵּשֶׁב תַּחְתֶּיהָ בַצֶּל עַד אֲשֶׁר יִרְאֶה מֵה־יְהוָה בְּעִיר:

6 The Lord God appointed a castor oil plant,^{b1} which sprouts very quickly, and it rose over Jonah and his simple booth, which did not offer him much protection,³⁰ to be shade over his head, to deliver him from his discomfort. Jonah rejoiced over the castor-oil plant with great joy.

וַיִּמַן יְהוָה־אֱלֹהִים קִיקִיּוֹן וַיַּעַל אֶמְעַל לְיוֹנָה לְהַיּוֹת צֶל־עַל־רֹאשׁוֹ לְהַצִּיל לוֹ מִקְרַעְתּוֹ וַיֵּשְׂמַח יוֹנָה עַל־הַקִּיקִיּוֹן שִׁמְתָה גְדוֹלָה:

7 God appointed a worm at dawn the next day, and it damaged the castor oil plant, and it withered. Its leaves fell off and it stopped growing.

וַיִּמַן הָאֱלֹהִים תּוֹלַעַת בַּעֲלוֹת הַשָּׁחַר לְמַחֲרַת וַתֵּךְ אֶת־הַקִּיקִיּוֹן וַיִּיבֶשׁ:

8 It was with the rising of the sun that God appointed a light but hot east wind;³¹ the sun beat on the head of Jonah and he fainted from the sudden heat. In his anguish, he asked for himself to die, and said: My death is better than my life with such terrible suffering.

וַיְהִי אֶבְרַח הַשָּׁמֶשׁ וַיִּמַן אֱלֹהִים רוּחַ קָדִים חַרְשִׁית וַתֵּךְ הַשָּׁמֶשׁ עַל־רֹאשׁ יוֹנָה וַיִּתְעַלֵּף וַיִּשְׁאַל אֶת־נַפְשׁוֹ לָמוֹת וַיֹּאמֶר טוֹב מוֹתִי מַחְיִי:

9 God said to Jonah: Are truly so upset over the castor oil plant? When Jonah became angry and asked for death after his prophecy went unfulfilled, God also asked: Are you truly so upset? Now, God asks about Jonah's death wish stemming from the loss of the plant and its shade. **He, Jonah, said: I am truly upset, to the point of death,** as the plant that was appointed for me is withering away.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־יוֹנָה הַהֵיטֵב חָרָה־לְךָ
עַל־הַקִּיקְיֹון וַיֹּאמֶר הֵיטֵב חָרָה־לִּי עַד־מָוֹת:

10 The Lord said: You pitied the castor oil plant, which sprouted on its own, **for which you did not exert any effort and did not cultivate it, which in a night came into being, and in a night perished;** essentially, this plant did not affect the world in any significant manner.

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֲתָה חִסַּתְּ עַל־הַקִּיקְיֹון אֲשֶׁר
לֹא־עָמְלָתָּ בּוֹ וְלֹא גִדַּלְתָּו שִׁבְן־לַיְלָה הָיָה
וּבִבְהֵמָה אָבָד:

11 Shall I not pity Nineveh, the great city, in which there are more than one hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know between their right and their left, innocent children and simple folk who have not committed any wicked acts, **and many animals,** which are not guilty of any wrongdoing? Do you want all this to be destroyed merely to preserve your reputation as a prophet? God accuses Jonah: You are bothered by the withering of a plant for which you bear no responsibility and in whose growth you were not involved, yet you remain insensitive toward the lives of myriads of people because of your own trivial considerations.

וְאֵיךְ לֹא אָחוּס עַל־כִּנְוָה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה
אֲשֶׁר יֵשְׁבֶיהָ מֵשֵׁתִים־עֶשְׂרֵה רְבֹו
אָדָם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָדַע בֵּין־יְמִינוֹ לְשִׁמְאֹלֹו
וּבִהֵמָה רַבָּה:

Background:

b1 Castor oil plant [*kikayon*]: The *kikayon* is probably the castor oil plant, *Ricinus communis*, from whose seeds castor oil is extracted. This oil is probably that which is referred to in the Talmud as *kik* oil. Ibn Ezra and the Septuagint identify the *kikayon* with the bottle gourd plant, *Lagenaria siceraria*, the *kara* in Rabbinic Hebrew. This plant also grows rapidly, is used for shade, and can wither away quickly due to its sensitivity to pests.

Text References:

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| 1 II Kings 14:25. | 17 See Rashi; Radak. |
| 2 See Joshua 19:13; commentary on Isaiah 2:16. | 18 See Radak; <i>Metzudat Tzion</i> . |
| 3 Rashi; Radak; see <i>Mekhilta, Petiḥta Bo</i> . | 19 <i>Targum Yonatan</i> ; Rashi, 2:9. |
| 4 Ibn Ezra. | 20 See Radak. |
| 5 See II Chronicles 2:15. | 21 See Radak. |
| 6 See Ibn Ezra. | 22 See Nahum 3. |
| 7 <i>Kuzari</i> 2:4; see Rashi; Radak. | 23 See Ibn Ezra. |
| 8 See Jerusalem Talmud, <i>Sanhedrin</i> 11:5. | 24 Radak. |
| 9 See <i>Mekhilta, Petiḥta</i> 29. | 25 See Mishna <i>Ta'anit</i> 2:1. |
| 10 See Radak. | 26 See Radak. |
| 11 See Genesis 14:13. | 27 See <i>Sanhedrin</i> 89b. |
| 12 See Ibn Ezra. | 28 Jeremiah 4:19–21, 15; Ezekiel 9:8, 11:13. |
| 13 Ibn Ezra, 2:1. | 29 See Radak; Malbim. |
| 14 <i>Yalkut Shimoni, Jonah</i> 1:550. | 30 See Malbim. |
| 15 <i>Targum Yonatan</i> . | 31 Rashi; see Ibn Ezra; Radak. |
| 16 See Radak, 2:8. | |