

Jonah – A Lesson In Compassion

By Rabbi Dr. Hillel ben David (Greg Killian)



[Introduction 1](#_Toc52353340)

[What was Jonah fleeing from? 2](#_Toc52353341)

[The Suicidal Prophet 3](#_Toc52353342)

[Teshuva - Repentance 3](#_Toc52353343)

[Compassion 6](#_Toc52353344)

[Questions 7](#_Toc52353345)

[A Sailor’s Life for Me 7](#_Toc52353346)



# Introduction

In this [study](study.html) I would like to examine the pathos of Sefer Jonah and relate it to our [prayers](prayer.html) on [Yom Kippur](kippur.html).[[1]](#footnote-1)

[One](one.html) of the highlights of the [Yom Kippur](kippur.html) liturgy is the reading of the Book of Jonah – a small book which contains a [world](worlds.html) of philosophy. The major message of the Book of Jonah is likewise the major message of [Yom Kippur](kippur.html), so that the proper understanding of the former will most certainly illuminate the latter. It is worth noting that we never hear the *content* of Jonah’s[[2]](#footnote-2) call to the Ninevites to repent, only the fact of that call, and their reaction. Further the [name](name.html) of the Book is “Jonah”, not “Nineveh”. This [teaches](teacher.html) us that Jonah is the central focus, not Nineveh! We are, therefore, perplexed when we do not see Jonah’s teshuva either. He never repents! This suggests that his words are not as important as his actions. This book will require a very thoughtful approach if we are to discern its true lessons.

What is Jonah’s[[3]](#footnote-3) background?

Jonah starts off with a crucial identification:

***Yonah (Jonah) 1:1*** *Now the word of* [*HaShem*](hashem.html) *came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying:*

Our sages tell that Yonah[[4]](#footnote-4) son of Amittai[[5]](#footnote-5) was the son of the widow from Tzorphath[[6]](#footnote-6) with whom Elijah the prophet stayed during the years of [famine](famine.html),[[7]](#footnote-7) and that it was this boy that Elijah revived.[[8]](#footnote-8)

***Melachim alef (I Kings) 17:17-24*** *And it came to pass after these things, that the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, fell* [*sick*](illness.html)*; and his sickness was so sore, that there was no breath left in him.* ***18*** *And she said unto Elijah: ‘What have I to do with thee, O thou man of God? art thou come unto me to bring my* [*sin*](sin.html) *to remembrance, and to slay my son?’* ***19*** *And he said unto her: ‘Give me thy son.’ And he took him out of her bosom, and carried him up into the upper chamber, where he abodes, and laid him upon his own bed.* ***20*** *And he cried unto the* [*HaShem*](hashem.html)*, and said:* [*HaShem*](hashem.html) *my God, hast Thou also brought evil upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by slaying her son?’* ***21*** *And he stretched himself upon the child* [*three*](three.html) *times, and cried unto the* [*HaShem*](hashem.html)*, and said:* [*HaShem*](hashem.html) *my God, I* [*pray*](prayer.html) *thee, let this child’s soul come back into him.’* ***22*** *And the* [*HaShem*](hashem.html) *hearkened unto the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came back into him, and he revived.* ***23*** *And Elijah took the child, and brought him down out of the upper chamber into the house, and delivered him unto his mother; and Elijah said: ‘See, thy son liveth.’* ***24*** *And the woman said to Elijah: ‘Now I* [*know*](daat.html) *that thou art a man of God, and that the word of the* [*HaShem*](hashem.html) *in thy* [*mouth*](body.html) *is truth* (Emet).*’*

The Sages[[9]](#footnote-9) identify this boy as Jonah. Our Sages[[10]](#footnote-10) further [teach](teacher.html) that Yonah’s mother was from the [tribe](tribes.html) of Asher, and his father from Zebulun.

*Amittai[[11]](#footnote-11)* is derived from the [Hebrew](hebrew.html) word: ‘Emet’, meaning truth. From this we understand that Jonah is a man of truth. Truth, as Jonah understands it, demands that evil never be overlooked; evil must be punished. Jonah is the “son of truth”, a man of unbending commitment to the truth. Keep this in mind because it plays a pivotal role later on.

Jonah was a prophet from Gath-hepher[[12]](#footnote-12) in the Kingdom of Israel, then under the rule of Yeroboam II. Gath-hepher is a [city](city.html) of the northern [tribe](tribes.html) of Zebulun, as the text says:

***Yehoshua (Joshua) 19:10-13******10*** *And the* [*third*](three.html) *lot came up for the children of Zebulun according to their families; and the border of their* [*inheritance*](inherit.html) *was unto Sarid.* ***11*** *And their border went up westward, even to Maralah, and reached to Dabbesheth; and it reached to the brook that is before Jokneam.* ***12*** *And it turned from Sarid eastward toward the sunrising unto the border of Chisloth-tabor; and it went out to Dobrath, and went up to Japhia.* ***13*** *And from thence it passed along eastward to* ***Gath-hepher****, to Ethkazin; and it went out at Rimmon-methoar unto Neah.*

The [tribe](tribes.html) of Zebulun is described in [Jacob](israelja.html)’s prophetic last words to his children as maritime merchants involved in the shipping trade: ‘Zebulun shall [dwell](dwelling.html) 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](orallaw.html) says that his father was from the [tribe](tribes.html) of Zebulun and his mother was from the [tribe](tribes.html) of Asher.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Why did this mariner flee from [HaShem](hashem.html) by going out to sea? The [Midrash](orallaw.html)[[14]](#footnote-14) says:

I will escape from His presence to a place where His glory is not declared. (If) I ascend above the [heavens](heaven.html), it is said, “Above the [heavens](heaven.html) is his glory”.[[15]](#footnote-15) (If) above the earth, (it is said), “The whole earth is full of his glory”[[16]](#footnote-16) ; behold, I will escape to the sea, to a place where His glory is not proclaimed.

Note also that as a member of the [ten](ten.html) northern [tribes](tribes.html), Jonah’s descendants are going to be taken into captivity by Assyria, whose capital is Nineveh! Clearly Jonah has some skin in this game.

The personality of Jonah is filled with ironies. He is called the boy;[[17]](#footnote-17) [one](one.html) of the prophets’ disciples; the young man;[[18]](#footnote-18) the prophet’s attendant;[[19]](#footnote-19) this lunatic; that man; His servant; and the prophet, who was from Gat-Chefer. He is ben-Amittai, the prophet of uncompromising truth, foreshadowed in his mother’s proclamation: “…the word of [Hashem](hashem.html) in your [mouth](body.html) is truth (EMET).”

# What was Jonah fleeing from?

In v.2, Jonah is commanded to go to Nineveh,[[20]](#footnote-20) but he attempts to flee “*from the presence of* [*HaShem*](hashem.html)”. And, just in case we didn’t get it the [first](one.html) [time](time.html), we see at the end of v.2 that the reason he was going to Tarshish was to escape “*from the presence of* [*HaShem*](hashem.html)”. Why is a PROPHET[[21]](#footnote-21) attempting to flee from the presence of [HaShem](hashem.html) when he knows **very** well that that is not possible? Further, what powerful emotion is driving him? Why did the prophet find a [mission](mission.html) to Nineveh so objectionable? These are crucial questions to understand because they build the picture that will explain this entire book. To approach an answer to some of these questions, let’s look at the rest of the pesukim and see the depth of emotion that Jonah exhibits.

# The Suicidal Prophet

The rest of chapter [one](one.html) tells us that there was a storm[[22]](#footnote-22) that begins to tear at the ship, Jonah demonstrates his despair and dissatisfaction with the entire enterprise of [HaShem](hashem.html)’s call; indeed, with the very essence of life. He *goes down* and sleeps. While everyone[[23]](#footnote-23) else is calling out to their gods, Jonah doesn’t even bother to [pray](prayer.html). He is disgusted and just descends into the bowels of the ship – to [sleep](mashal.html)! Once awoken, he does *not* call out to [HaShem](hashem.html) for [salvation](salvation.html), because he is tired of the whole process of [sin](sin.html), [forgiveness](forgive.html), [sin](sin.html), [forgiveness](forgive.html), ad infinitum and ad nauseum. If there is no penalty for [sin](sin.html), then there is no truth to [HaShem](hashem.html) and His word. This is not something that the son of truth can abide. Without truth, life is not worth living.

When he is awoken, Jonah tells the sailors that his own death would be the *only* survivable option. It is notable, in v.12, that Jonah comes up with this solution as his [*first*](one.html) option. Normally, a man will seek many other options before he calls for his own death. Why doesn’t Jonah look at other options? Why doesn’t Jonah simply repent and agree to go to Nineveh? It seems clear that Jonah wanted to die. In other words, Jonah was so upset about his [mission](mission.html) in Nineveh that he wanted to die. We will see that this suicidal attitude a couple more times in this small book.

Once in the belly of the fish, Jonah is silent for [three](three.html) days. At that point, instead of [praying](prayer.html) to be saved, he offers a [psalm](psalms1.html) of thanksgiving to [HaShem](hashem.html) for having saved him, confident that “yet I will look again toward Your holy [temple](temple.html)”. What is going on?

# Teshuva - Repentance

In chapter [two](two.html), Jonah prays and [HaShem](hashem.html) causes the fish to vomit him out. However, a careful reading of this chapter will show a complete lack of teshuva. Jonah never speaks out his [sin](sin.html), nor does he repent of his [desire](needs.html) to avoid going to Nineveh. Jonah is an extremely reluctant prophet.

Let’s examine Jonah’s [prayer](prayer.html) and compare it to Rambam’s famous formulation of “proper Teshuva”:[[24]](#footnote-24)

What is Teshuva? That the sinner should abandon his [sin](sin.html) and remove it from his thoughts and commit to never again behave thusly, as it says: “The [wicked](wicked.html) shall leave his path”. Similarly, he should regret his past, as it says: “For after I had returned away, I repented”. And He Who knows all secrets should [be able to] testify regarding him that he will never again return to this [sin](sin.html), as it says: “nor shall we say any more to the work of our [hands](fourteen.html).[You are our gods]”.

It was “imperfect” teshuva that Jonah rejected, both for himself and also from the Ninevites. It was the teshuva where someone profoundly and deeply regrets his behavior, if only because of the sorry state he is in as a result, and commits to never again transgress; only to find himself a day, a week, a month, or even several years later repeating his earlier sinful behavior. This was the “imperfect” teshuva, a teshuva reflective of the pulsating beat of life, the pendulum to and fro of all of [creation](bara.html), which Jonah, the son of truth, could not abide.

The key to understanding Jonah’s [prayer](prayer.html) lies in the juxtaposition of v. 9 and v. 10:

*9: Those who pay regard to lying vanities forsake their loyalty.*

*10: But I will* [*sacrifice*](korbanot.html) *to You with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay that which I have vowed.* [*Salvation*](salvation.html) *belongs to* [*HaShem*](hashem.html)*.*

As opposed to the sailors who “pay regard to lying vanities” and then “forsake their loyalty” (i.e. do not fulfill their commitments), I pay regard only to You and “will pay that which I have vowed”.

This, in a nutshell, is Jonah’s argument with [HaShem](hashem.html): Why do You pay heed to those who make promises which they ignore and who faith is only crisis-deep?

We now understand Jonah’s “[prayer](prayer.html)” inside the fish. Yonah maintains his position - that only a true penitent, [one](one.html) whose commitment reaches to the core of his being, is worthy of [HaShem](hashem.html)’s favor. Jonah is [one](one.html) like that - and he protests [HaShem](hashem.html)’s kindness to the sailors (already witnessed) and His plan to show similar kindness to the Ninevites.

In chapter [three](three.html), the people of Nineveh, including their king, are frightened into a quick and dramatic plan of action. Public fasting, sackcloth and ashes, and even a change in behavior, are called for in order to avert the great disaster. Just like the sailors, however, there is no introspection, no sense that the [community](community.html) is seriously off-course and has fallen far from [HaShem](hashem.html)’s graces; the motivation is purely survival. This is exactly what Jonah feared - not that [HaShem](hashem.html) would ignore this ignoble teshuva, but that he would accept it. And accept it He did!

Why did [HaShem](hashem.html) accept their Teshuva?

In v.3:10, the verse indicates that [HaShem](hashem.html) forgave them because they actually repaired the breach of their society and changed their behavior. They suddenly had the potential to become something significantly better that what they were. However, the final verse of the book (and the entire argument leading up to it) states that [HaShem](hashem.html) forgave them due to His compassion for them as His beloved creatures, no more and no less.

We find this odd behavior of including the animals[[25]](#footnote-25) in the fast, which, judging from the Ninevites motivations, is actually easy to understand. They were not fasting to search deep and wide, to find the dark side of their hearts and to search out ways of returning to [HaShem](hashem.html). That sort of task can only be undertaken by a person of intelligence and sensitivity. This Teshuva was simply [one](one.html) of [physical](physical.html) survival, [one](one.html) which is equally shared by the lettered and unlettered, the old and the young, and even the animals.

In chapter [four](four.html), Jonah complains to [HaShem](hashem.html), about the teshuva of the Ninevites, using wording that is very similar to a repeated refrain of [Yom Kippur](kippur.html):

***Yonah (Jonah) 4:2*** *And he* [*prayed*](prayer.html) *unto* [*HaShem*](hashem.html)*, and said: ‘I* [*pray*](prayer.html) *Thee, O* [*HaShem*](hashem.html)*, was not this my saying, when I was yet in mine own country? Therefore, I fled beforehand unto Tarshish; for I* [*knew*](daat.html) *that Thou art a gracious God, and compassionate, long-suffering, and abundant in mercy, and repentest Thee of the evil.*

Compare what Jonah said to what we actually say on [Yom Kippur](kippur.html):

***Shemot (***[***Exodus***](exodus.html)***) 34:6-7***[*HaShem*](hashem.html)*,* [*HaShem*](hashem.html)*, God, merciful and gracious, long suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands.*

Jonah, the son of Truth, left “Truth” out of his equation. His claim is that [HaShem](hashem.html) is, indeed, violating the attribute of truth by allowing this imperfect teshuva to be accepted. Jonah tells [HaShem](hashem.html) that He is not truthful: There is no penalty given to the [wicked](wicked.html). They get forgiven just like the righteous.

At this point, [HaShem](hashem.html) has already tried [teaching](teacher.html) Jonah that He has other attributes that take precedence over truth, namely compassion. Jonah disobeyed [HaShem](hashem.html) and deserved death, yet [HaShem](hashem.html) preserved him in the fish. Jonah did NOT get the point. So, [HaShem](hashem.html) is going to repeat the lesson in a [new](new.html) way.

Never the less, Jonah sees it as though [HaShem](hashem.html) has pardoned, or will pardon, Adolf Hitler. He cannot abide in that kind of [world](worlds.html). He went thru the attribute of truth to bring justice. This is why he repeatedly wanted to die. This is why Jonah replaced the midda of truth with the midda ‘changing Your mind’.

How does [HaShem](hashem.html) [teach](teacher.html) Jonah about Divine compassion?

In spite of the fact that Jonah was already shaded by his [Succah](succoth.html), [HaShem](hashem.html) made a Kikayon[[26]](#footnote-26) grow up over him, giving him shade. Why was Jonah so happy about his plant?[[27]](#footnote-27) How did it “[save](salvation.html) him from his distress”?

This gourd was a manifestation of [HaShem](hashem.html)’s compassion. Jonah deserved to be punished because of his disobedience, never the less, [HaShem](hashem.html) showered him with compassion.

It seems that [HaShem](hashem.html) was [teaching](teacher.html) Jonah about the beauty of [creation](bara.html), and how that beauty is built upon the fluctuating rhythms of life. This morning, you are shaded by a Kikayon and it gives you great pleasure, even though it wasn’t here yesterday and may not be here tomorrow. Impermanence is not a shortcoming among [HaShem](hashem.html)’s creatures, it’s part of their essential definition.

In order to reinforce this point, [HaShem](hashem.html) appoints a worm to destroy the tree, and then appoints a hot wind to torture Jonah. At this point, Jonah got the point. He now understood the value of compassion in giving folks another chance, even if it meant delaying truth.

The final argument is now ready:

And [HaShem](hashem.html) said to Jonah: Do you do well to be so angry for the plant? And he said: I do well to be so angry, even to death. Then [HaShem](hashem.html) said, You had concern for the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night; And should I not spare Nineveh, that great [city](city.html), where there are more than [one](one.html) hundred and [twenty](twenty.html) thousand persons who cannot discern between their right [hand](mashal.html) and their left [hand](mashal.html); and also much cattle?

Who are these people who do not [know](daat.html) their right from their left? Why are the cattle mentioned? And didn’t [HaShem](hashem.html) [forgive](forgive.html) the Ninevites because they had changed their ways? Why is Divine compassion necessary in such a case?

[HaShem](hashem.html)’s final statement to Jonah is the powerful message of this Sefer. [HaShem](hashem.html) loves His creatures, in spite of their failings - perhaps even because of them. The teshuva which is sincere, even if driven by the most base threat and even if it doesn’t have “staying power”, is still acceptable to [HaShem](hashem.html) and allows the Divine compassion to nurture and bring [salvation](salvation.html) to His children, even those who cannot discern between their right [hand](mashal.html) and their left [hand](mashal.html) i.e. people whose teshuva is like that of a child.

We [know](daat.html) understand the significance of this story to the afternoon of Yom HaKippurim. For over a week (at least), we have been [standing](mashal.html) before the Heavenly Throne, making commitments to leave our past behind and embrace a nobler [future](future.html). We have come close to the end of the road, it is a few hours away from the closing of the gates, and a great [fear](fear.html) overcomes us. Will we be able to live up to any of this? Will tomorrow be a repeat of yesterday - or, worse yet, of a few weeks ago? We tremble with the [knowledge](knowledge.html) that we cannot give a full guarantee, that we are human, that we fail. And then we hear the story of Yonah, of a prophet who pronounced those fears as doctrine - and who was soundly defeated by Divine compassion.

# Compassion

The [Hebrew](hebrew.html) word for [womb](thebirth.html) is *rechem* – רֶחֶם. The [three](three.html) [letters](letters.html) of רֶחֶם also form the root of the [Hebrew](hebrew.html) word Rachamim - רַחֲמִים, which is normally translated as *compassion*. This [teaches](teacher.html) us that the [womb](thebirth.html) is the *source* of compassion.

What does a [womb](thebirth.html) do? The [womb](thebirth.html) takes a zygote[[28]](#footnote-28) and determines whether the zygote is viable: Does it have the *potential* to succeed? If it has that potential, then the [womb](thebirth.html) shelters and nourishes the zygote. If it does not have the potential to succeed, then the zygote is expelled by the [womb](thebirth.html). Thus, we understand that Rachamim – רַחֲמִים – compassion, is the potential for success. If [one](one.html) does teshuva – repentance, then [one](one.html) has the potential to succeed, and compassion will nourish and shelter that potential.

This understanding leads to another interesting idea: [Rosh HaShana](teruah.html) is the day of man’s conception. [Ten](ten.html) days later that zygote is implanted in the [womb](thebirth.html), on Yom HaKippurim, the day of compassion. If we repent, then we have potential. If we have potential, then [HaShem](hashem.html) gives us compassion, on Yom HaKippurim. This is why we read the book of Jonah on Yom HaKippurim. This book is all about compassion.

If we look at the siddur for the additions to our [prayers](prayer.html) during the [ten](ten.html) days between [Rosh HaShana](teruah.html) and [Yom Kippur](kippur.html), we will see that they all focus on life. Further, we [pray](prayer.html) that we will be written in the book of life, not because we deserve it, but because that is [HaShem](hashem.html)’s [desire](needs.html). His [womb](thebirth.html), His compassion, is all about life and its potential.

**Another Dimension**

Another dimension of the prophecy of Jonah is brought out in the Holy [Zohar](orallaw.html).[[29]](#footnote-29)

In the words of the [Zohar](orallaw.html): These verses allude to the whole of man’s life from his emergence into the [world](worlds.html) until the [resurrection](techiyat.html) of the dead. Jonah’s going down into the boat is man’s soul entering the [body](body.html) to live in this [world](worlds.html). Man goes in this [world](worlds.html) like a boat in the great sea that seems likely to be wrecked. When man [sins](sin.html) in this [world](worlds.html) and thinks he will flee from his Master without taking account of the [world](futures.html) to come, [HaShem](hashem.html) sends a great storm-wind - the decree of harsh justice - and demands justice from this man, striking the boat and causing [illness](ilness.html). Even on his sickbed, his soul is still not stirred to repent - Jonah goes down into the depths of the boat and slumbers.

Who is the captain of the boat that wakes him up? This is the good inclination, who tells him, “Now is not the [time](time.html) to [sleep](mashal.html), they are taking you to judgment over all that you have done in this [world](worlds.html): repent!” What is your work? From where do you come? Which is your land? From which people are you”.[[30]](#footnote-30) What work have you done in this [world](worlds.html) - confess to [HaShem](hashem.html) about it! Think where you come from - a putrid drop - and don’t be arrogant before Him! Remember that you were created from the very earth!

Ask yourself if you are still protected by the [merits](merit.html) of the founding [fathers](fathers.html) of your people!” When the person is about to die, his defending [angels](angels.html) try to [save](salvation.html) him - the sailors try to row back to the land - but the storm-wind is too strong and can only be assuaged when man is taken down into his grave.

Throwing Jonah into the sea corresponds to [burial](burial.html) in the grave. The belly of the fish is hell, as it says, “From the belly of hell I cried out”.[[31]](#footnote-31)

The [three](three.html) days and nights Jonah was in the belly of the fish corresponds to the [first](one.html) [three](three.html) days in the grave, when his innards burst onto his [face](body.html) and they say, “Take what you put inside yourself: you [ate](eating.html) and drank all your days and did not give to the poor. You made all your days like [festivals](festivals.html), while the poor went hungry and did not [eat](eating.html) with you.”

The judgment continues for [thirty](thirty.html) days with the soul and [body](body.html) being judged together. Afterwards the soul ascends and the [body](body.html) rots in the ground, until the [time](time.html) when [HaShem](hashem.html) will revive the dead. “He has swallowed up death for ever”[[32]](#footnote-32) - “And [HaShem](hashem.html) [spoke](mashal.html) to the fish and it vomited Jonah out onto the dry land”.[[33]](#footnote-33) And in this fish there are remedies for the whole [world](worlds.html).

# Questions

*Why did Jonah run away?*

Hopefully by now we realize that he ran away from [HaShem](hashem.html) because he could not abide [HaShem](hashem.html)’s seeming disregard of the truth in favor of compassion.

*Why was he swallowed by the fish – repentance was clearly not the issue? (His repentance was clearly insincere because he quickly repeated his behavior.)*

Jonah was swallowed by the fish in order to [teach](teacher.html) him that there are times when [HaShem](hashem.html) exercises the attribute of Compassion while seemingly disregarding the attribute of truth. Unfortunately, Jonah was grateful but he did not ‘get’ the lesson. He still did not understand.

*What was the overall message of the book given the ‘hanging’ ending?*

*The ending is deeper than just Jonah is hot? Jonah wanted to die… This does not make sense! No sane person would want to die just because he was hot.*

Since Jonah did not get a chance to [speak](mashal.html) his mind at the end of this Sefer, we must understand that he finally absorbed the message. Why? Because it is obvious that [HaShem](hashem.html) tried at least twice to convey the message. If Jonah had not yet absorbed this message, [HaShem](hashem.html) would try at least [three](three.html) times to get His message across. Further, the [Midrash](orallaw.html) indicates that Jonah did understand [HaShem](hashem.html)’s message at the end of the Sefer.

# A Sailor’s Life for Me

By Rabbi Daniel Lapin

You don’t need the power of [command](cmds613.html) in order to be a leader. You don’t have to be able to [fire](fire.html), fine or imprison people in order to lead them. It is possible to influence others by evoking admiration.

Let’s survey the [first](one.html) chapter of the book of Jonah, focusing on the interaction between Jonah and the sailors who take him Tarshish in his attempt to evade God and His directives.

At [first](one.html), the crew is merely “them”.

***Yonah (Jonah) 1:3*** *...[Jonah] went down to Jaffa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare for it, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish...*

Even on today’s large cruise-liners, people tend to socialize. In Jonah’s day, ships were much smaller, carrying mostly cargo. Not surprisingly, experiencing a terrifying storm, Jonah and the crew became acquainted. In Jonah’s [eyes](body.html), they were no longer a faceless “them.” They were sailors, idolatrous but nonetheless, professional mariners.

***Yonah (Jonah) 1:5*** *Then the sailors were afraid, and cried each* [*one*](one.html) *to his own god...*

At this point, Jonah surprisingly goes below deck for a nap.

The captain awakens him, asking him to [pray](prayer.html) as well.

Now the sailors evolve still further, becoming men. The [Hebrew](hebrew.html) word chosen for ‘man’ here is **ISH**. **ISH** suggests more than a [male](male%2Bfemale.html) human, rather a man possessing nobility of spirit.

***Yonah (Jonah) 1:7*** *And each man said to his colleague, come let’s throw lots in order to discover on whose account is this evil* [*coming*](coming.html) *upon us...*

[HaShem](hashem.html) responded to the sailors and the lots reveal Jonah to be the cause of the unnatural storm.

***Yonah (Jonah) 1:8*** *And they said to him, inasmuch as you are the cause of this evil, please tell us what is your profession and from where do you come, what is your land and from what people do you come?*

By their brilliant question, these sailors show themselves to be quite different from what [one](one.html) imagines sailors to be. After all, since [time](time.html) immemorial, sailors separated from family, society, and the institutions of civilization, tend to be rough, rowdy, and unrestrained.

However, these men realize that how [one](one.html) contributes to the [world](worlds.html) through work reveals a great deal about a person. So, does examining those with whom he associates. They attempt to make sense of Jonah through their questions.

Jonah responds by essentially explaining that the only relevant thing they need to [know](daat.html) is that this unnatural storm is due to his relationship with God.

***Yonah (Jonah) 1:9*** *And he said to them, I am a* [*Hebrew*](hebrew.html) *and I* [*fear*](fear.html) *the Lord, God of* [*heaven*](heaven.html)*...*

They ask Jonah what they can do in order to restore calm to the wild seas.

“Throw me overboard” he calmly assures them.

These men truly reveal greatness by rejecting this answer. Verse 13 describes their mighty, but futile, struggle to bring the ship safely into harbor. Eventually, they accept Jonah’s words and obey him, throwing him overboard.

Through their interaction, Jonah comes to recognize the Godly spirit in these men. He relates to them not as faceless, unimportant individuals-them--but as sensitive and morally aware men. In turn, they recognize his holiness and [pray](prayer.html) to Jonah’s God, rather than to their gods. After the storm abates, validating their actions, these sailors become God-fearing men, bringing sacrifices to the Lord and vowing to lead upright lives.

The sailors’ behavior led Jonah to grow in the way he related to people; his understanding of [HaShem](hashem.html) and willingness to [sacrifice](korbanot.html) himself for the ship and her crew similarly made its mark on the men.

Jonah was merely a passenger with no power. The sailors were not society’s elite. Yet each exerted enormous influence by evoking admiration. Jonah learned how to better relate to people; the sailors learned how to better relate to God.

**Bibliography:**

*Pirke De Rabbi Eliezer*, Translated and annotated with introduction and indices by Gerald Friedlander, 1916

**\* \* \***

**Notes:**

The footnote notes in Pirke De Rebbe Eliezer, chapter 10, has the following note:

*A very interesting point is suggested by a passage in Origen, contra Celsum, vii. 57, according to which Jonah was considered to be the* [*Messiah*](mashiach.html) *in place of* [*Jesus*](yeshua.html)*. Our book ascribes certain Messianic functions to Jonah in* [*connection*](connection.html) *with the Leviathan and the Day of Israel’s* [*salvation*](salvation.html)*. Perhaps he is a* [*type*](types.html) *of the “*[*Messiah*](mashiach.html) *ben* [*Joseph*](joseph.html)*” who is to overcome the Anti-Christ or Satan (i.e. the Leviathan). The* [*New*](new.html) *Testament* [*connects*](connection.html) *the story of Jonah with its* [*Messiah*](mashiach.html)*; see Matt. 12:39-41 and ibid. 16:4; cf.* [*Luke*](luke.html) *11:29-32. The “Fish” as a Christian Messianic emblem may be associated with the Jonah legends.*

in [Hebrew](hebrew.html), a dove is a **YoNaH** - יוֹנָה. Without knowing [Hebrew](hebrew.html), there is no reason for you to assume any [connection](connection.html) between a bird on Noah’s [Ark](ark.html) and a [Hebrew](hebrew.html) prophet in the belly of a fish.

But a [connection](connection.html) there certainly is. Not only are Jonah and the dove spelled identically but consider this: both stories concern a boat saving people from perilous waters. Both the dove and Jonah were sent on their [mission](mission.html) twice. Both accounts contain a period of 40 days.[[34]](#footnote-34) In both cases vegetation signals the end of the [mission](mission.html); an olive leaf for the dove and a Kikayon tree for Jonah. Finally, in [one](one.html) case a human saves animals from drowning and in the other, an animal saves a human from drowning.

Ancient [Jewish](gen-jew.html) wisdom explains the link between the dove and Jonah. The dove symbolizes the urge to return home.

**Yeshayahu (Isaiah) 60:8** *Who are these that fly like a* [*cloud*](important.html)*, like doves [flying home] to their dovecotes?*

For Jonah, returning home means returning to his true nature and [mission](mission.html), back to where he is most comfortable, obeying [HaShem](hashem.html). After many wrong turns and adventures, Jonah finally obeys [HaShem](hashem.html). He brings Nineveh to repentance and learns the lesson of [HaShem](hashem.html)’s compassion. He is once again a prophet of [HaShem](hashem.html); Jonah is home again. For the dove returning home initially means the [ark](ark.html) but eventually leaving the [ark](ark.html) and independently building his own home.

**\* \* \***

This [study](study.html) was written by

Rabbi Dr. Hillel ben David (Greg Killian).

Comments may be submitted to:

Rabbi Dr. Greg Killian

12210 Luckey Summit

San Antonio, TX 78252

Internet address: gkilli@aol.com

Web page: <https://www.betemunah.org/>

(360) 918-2905

Return to [The WATCHMAN](https://www.betemunah.org/) home page

Send comments to Greg Killian at his email address: gkilli@aol.com

1. Adapted from Dr. David Hentschke of Bar-Ilan University, in a recent article (Megadim 29, pp. 75-90), highlighted several difficulties in the text and suggested an underlying theological-psychological issue as the basis for Yonah’s reticence to go to Nineveh. It is that issue which will be the springboard for our approach, much of which is based on the textual analysis proposed by Hentschke. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Prophet in the days of Jeroboam II.; son of Amittai of Gath-hepher. He is a historical personage; for, according to II Kings 14:25, he predicted in HaShem’s name the extent to which Jeroboam II. would restore the boundaries of the Northern Kingdom, “from the entering of Hamath unto the sea of the plain.” The wording of the passage may also imply that Jonah’s prophecy was uttered even before Jeroboam II., perhaps in the time of Jehoahaz (thus Klostermann to II Kings 13:4). In any case Jonah is one of the prophets who advised the house of Jehu, and it is not unlikely that with him the series of prophets that began with Elijah came to a close.  [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. He received his prophetic appointment from Elisha, under whose orders he anointed Jehu (II Kings ix.; Ḳimḥhi,*ad loc.*; and Ẓemaḥ David).  [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Meaning *dove*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See also Melachim Bet (II Kings) 14:23-27 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Pirke D’Rebbi Eliezer ch 33 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Melachim aleph (I Kings) 17:8ff [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. 5 vv 17-24; Midrash Shochar Tov 26 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Pirke d’Rabbi Eliezer, 33 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Yalkut Shimoni [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. אמתי = “One whose words always come true”. Lit. “my truth”. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Melachim bet (2 Kings) 14:25 (Gat-Chefer). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Tanchuma Tzav: 14, Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 10, Jerusalem 1852, 24a. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Pirke De Rebbe Eliezer,* chapter 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Tehillim (Psalms) 113:4 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Yeshayahu (Isaiah) 6:3 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Melachim alef (I Kings) 17:22. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Melachim bet (II Kings) 9:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Melachim bet (II kings) 9:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Nineveh, the city to which Jonah was sent, was a very important city in ancient Assyria. Nineveh was Israel’s enemy and Jonah really wanted HaShem to destroy them [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. We recognize that a prophet is a man of great spiritual, emotional, and intellectual stature (see, inter alia, Rambam’s Guide For The Perplexed II: 32-34) [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The storm which overtook Jonah is quoted as one of three most noteworthy storms (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:6). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. [Pirke D’Rebbi Eliezer](pirkiderabbieliezer.pdf) chapter 10 say: Rabbi Hananiah says, PEOPLE FROM ALL THE SEVENTY NATIONS WERE PRESENT IN THAT BOAT, each one with his idols in his hand (cf. 1:5). [I.e. the story of Jonah has universal application.] They prostrated to their idols, saying, “Let each one call in the name of his gods and the god that answers us and saves us from this trouble is God”. Jonah was asleep until the captain of the boat came and aroused him. When Jonah told him he was a Hebrew, the captain said, “We have heard that the God of the Hebrews is great. Rise and call to your God: perhaps He will have pity on us and perform miracles for us as He did for you at the Red Sea “. Jonah said, “I will not deny that this trouble has come upon you because of me. Throw me into the sea and it will become calm”. Rabbi Shimon says: The sailors did not want to throw Jonah into the sea, but after throwing all their baggage into the sea and trying in vain to row back to the shore, they took Jonah and lowered him up to his ankles into the water. The sea started becoming calmer, but when they hoisted him up again it started to rage again. They lowered him in up to his belly and it became calm; they pulled him up and it raged again. They lowered him down to his neck and it became calm, but when they pulled him up again it continued raging, until they threw him in completely - and the sea became calm. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Mishneh Torah Teshuva 2:2 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See 3:7 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Castor-oil plant? [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. The gourd of Jonah was enormous. Before its appearance Jonah was tortured by the heat and by insects of all kinds, his clothes having been burned by the heat of the belly of the fish; he was tortured again after the worm had caused the gourd to wither. This brought Jonah to pray that God should be a merciful ruler, not a strict judge ([Pirke Rabbi Eliezer](pirkiderabbieliezer.pdf) 10; Yalkut. 551). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. A **zygote** (from Greek ζυγωτός *zygōtos* ”joined” or “yoked”, from ζυγοῦν *zygoun* ”to join” or “to yoke”), is the initial cell formed when two gamete cells (a sperm and an egg for example) are joined by means of sexual reproduction. In multicellular organisms, it is the earliest developmental stage of the embryo.  [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Vayakhel 199a ff [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Yonah (Jonah) 1:8 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Yonah (Jonah) 2:3 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Yeshayahu (Isaiah) 25:8 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Yonah (Jonah) 2:11 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Bereshit (Genesis) 7:12; Yonah (Jonah) 3:4 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)