

Why Yonah Runs: A Close Reading of Sefer Yonah

Perek 3: Is Nineveh's Teshuvah Authentic or a Sham?

I. Yonah heads to Nineveh

1. Chapters 1-2	Chapters 3-4
1st command to go to Nineveh, Yonah disobeys	2nd command to go to Nineveh, Yonah obeys
"Teshuvah" of captain and sailors in face of danger	Teshuva of king and people of Nineveh in face of danger
Yonah speaks to G-d	Yonah speaks to G-d
Fish used to send message	Kikayon used to send message
Essential question: Can you run away from your destiny?	Essential question: Can inauthentic teshuvah still be valid?

2. Sefer Yonah 4:1-2 (1) This displeased Jonah greatly, and he was grieved. (2) He prayed to the LORD, saying, "O LORD! 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."	1. יונה ד (1) וַיִּרַע אֱלֹהֵי יוֹנָה רָעָה גְדוֹלָה וַיֵּחָר לוֹ: (2) וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל אֱלֹהֵי' וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי ה' הַלֹּא־זֶה דְּבָרִי עַד־הַיּוֹתִי עַל־אֲדַמְתִּי עַל־כֵּן קִדְמַתִּי לְבָרַח תִּרְשִׁישָׁה כִּי יָדַעְתִּי כִּי אַתָּה אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְרוּחַם אֶרֶץ אֲפִים וְרֵב־חֹסֶד וְנֶחָם עַל־הָרָעָה:
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3. Sefer Yonah, 3 (1) The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: (2) Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it what I tell you. (3) Jonah went at once to Nineveh in accordance with the LORD's command. Nineveh was an enormously large city, a three days' walk across.	3. יונה ג (1) וַיְהִי דְבַר־ה' אֶל־יוֹנָה שֵׁנִית לֵאמֹר: (2) קוּם לךְ אֶל־נִינְוָה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה וְקֹרֵא אֲלֶיהָ אֶת־הַקְּרִיאָה אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי דֹבֵר אֵלֶיךָ: (3) וַיָּקָם יוֹנָה וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶל־נִינְוָה כַּדְּבַר ה' וְנִינְוָה הָיְתָה עִיר־גְּדוֹלָה לְאֻלּוּקִים מֵהֶלֶךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים: (4) וַיַּחֲל יוֹנָה לְבֹא בָעִיר מֵהֶלֶךְ יוֹם אֶחָד וַיִּקְרָא וַיֹּאמֶר עוֹד אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם וְנִינְוָה נִהְפָּכֶת:
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(4) Jonah started out and made his way into the city the distance of one day's walk, and proclaimed: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (5) The people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast, and great and small alike put on sackcloth. (6) When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his robe, put on sackcloth, and sat in ashes. (7) And he had the word cried through Nineveh: "By decree of the king and his nobles: No man or beast—of flock or herd—shall taste anything! They shall not graze, and they shall not drink water! (8) They shall be covered with sackcloth—man and beast—and shall cry mightily to God. Let everyone turn back from his evil ways and from the injustice of which he is guilty. (9) Who knows but that God may turn and relent? He may turn back from His wrath, so that we do not perish." (10) God saw what they did, how they were turning back from their evil ways. And God renounced the punishment He had planned to bring upon them, and did not carry it out.	(5) וַיֵּאמְרוּ אֲנָשֵׁי נִינְוָה בְּאֻלֹּקִים וַיִּקְרְאוּ צוֹם וַיִּלְבְּשׁוּ שָׂקִים מִגְדֹּלָם וְעַד־קִטְנָם: (6) וַיִּגַע הַדָּבָר אֶל־מֶלֶךְ נִינְוָה וַיִּסָּחֲמוּ מִכִּסְאוֹ וַיַּעֲבֹר אֶת־תּוֹתוֹ מֵעַלְיוֹ וַיִּכַּס שָׁק וַיֵּשֶׁב עַל־הָאֶפֶר: (7) וַיִּזְעַק וַיֹּאמֶר בְּנִינְוָה מִטַּעַם הַמֶּלֶךְ וּגְדָלְיוֹ לֵאמֹר הָאָדָם וְהַבְּהֵמָה הַבֶּקֶר וְהַצֹּאן אֶל־יִטְעֲמוּ מֵאוֹמָה אֶל־יָרְעוּ וּמִים אֶל־יִשְׁתּוּ: (8) וַיִּתְּבְּסוּ שָׂקִים הָאָדָם וְהַבְּהֵמָה וַיִּקְרְאוּ אֶל־אֻלֹּקִים בַּחֲזָקָה וַיֵּשְׁבוּ אִישׁ מִדְּרָכּוֹ הָרָעָה וּמִן־הַחֲמָס אֲשֶׁר בְּכַפֵּיהֶם: (9) מִי־יֵדָע יָשׁוּב וְנָחַם הָאֻלֹּקִים וְשָׁב מִחֲרוֹן אַפּוֹ וְלֹא נֶאֱבַד: (10) וַיֵּרָא הָאֻלֹּקִים אֶת־מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם כִּי־שָׁבוּ מִדְּרָכָם הָרָעָה וַיִּנָּחֵם הָאֻלֹּקִים עַל־הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר לַעֲשׂוֹת־לָהֶם וְלֹא עָשָׂה:
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4. Command in Yonah 1:2	Command in Yonah 3: 1-2
קוֹם לָךְ אֶל־נִינְוָה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה וּקְרֵא עֲלֶיהָ כִּי־עָלְתָה רָעָתָם לִפְנֵי: Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim judgment upon it; for their wickedness has come before Me.	(1) וַיְהִי דְבַר־ה' אֶל־יוֹנָה שֵׁנִית לֵאמֹר: (2) קוֹם לָךְ אֶל־נִינְוָה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה וּקְרֵא אֵלֶיהָ אֶת־הַקְּרִיאָה אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי דֹבֵר אֵלֶיךָ: (1) The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: (2) Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it what I tell you.

7. In favor of Nineveh's Teshuvah

- Teshuvah movement happens after only 1 day (city is 3 days walk)
- וַיֵּאֱמִינוּ אָנְשֵׁי נִינְוָה בָּאלֹקִים, the people believed in G-d
- מֶגְדּוֹלַם וְעַד־קָטָנָם, adults and children
- Grassroots movement, followed by King:
 - Official edict on fasting, sackcloth
 - Tefilah and Teshuvah: וַיִּקְרְאוּ אֶל־אֲלֹקִים בַּחֲזָקָה וַיֵּשְׁבוּ אִישׁ מִדְּרָכּוֹ הָרָעָה וּמִן־הַחֲמֵס אֲשֶׁר בִּכְפִיהֶם:
- וַיֵּרָא הָאֱלֹקִים אֶת־מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם כִּי־שָׁבוּ מִדְּרָכָם הָרָעָה וַיִּנָּחֵם הָאֱלֹקִים עַל־הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר־דָּבַר לַעֲשׂוֹת־לָהֶם וְלֹא עָשָׂה:
- God saw what they did, how they were turning back from their evil ways. And God renounced the punishment that had been planned for them, and did not carry it out (Yonah 3:10).

8. Mishnah Taanit 2:1 What is the customary order of fast days? Normally the sacred ark in the synagogue, which was mobile, was kept in a locked room. However, on fast days they remove the ark to the main city square and place burnt ashes upon the ark, as a sign of mourning. And they also place ashes on the	8. משנה תענית ב:א סדר תעניות כִּיצַד, מוֹצִיִּין אֶת הַתֵּבָה לְרוֹחוּבָה שֶׁל עִיר, וְנוֹתְנִין אַפֵּר מִקְלָה עַל גְּבִי הַתֵּבָה, וּבִרְאֵשׁ הַנֶּשִׂיא וּבִרְאֵשׁ אֵב בֵּית דִּין, וְכָל אֶחָד וְאֶחָד נוֹתֵן בְּרִאשׁוֹ. <u>הַזֶּקֶן שֶׁבֵּהוּ</u> <u>אוֹמֵר לִפְנֵיהֶם דְּבָרֵי כְבוֹשִׁין, אַחֲנִינוּ, לֹא נֶאֱמַר</u> <u>בְּאֲנָשֵׁי נִינוּה, וִירָא הָאֱלֹוִקִים אֶת שָׁקֶם וְאֵת</u>
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head of the Nasi, and on the head of the deputy Nasi, and each and every member of the community likewise places ashes upon his head. The eldest member of the community says to the congregation statements of reproof, for example: Our brothers, it is not stated with regard to the people of Nineveh: And God saw their sackcloth and their fasting. Rather, the verse says: "And God saw their deeds, that they had turned from their evil way" (Jonah 3:10). And in the Prophets it says: "And rend your hearts and not your garments, and return to the Lord your God" (Joel 2:13). This teaches that prayer and fasting are insufficient, as one must also repent and amend his ways in practice.

תעניתם, אלא (יונה ג) וירא האלוקים את מעשיהם, כי שבו מדרכם הרעה. ובקבלה הוא אומר (יואל ב) וקרעו לבבכם ואל בגדיכם:

9. Talmud Bavli, Ta'anit 16a

What does he say? Our brothers, it is not sackcloth and fasting that cause atonement for our sins. Rather, repentance and good deeds will cause our atonement. This is as we find with regard to the people of Nineveh, that it is not stated about them: And God saw their sackcloth and their fasting. Rather, the verse states: "And God saw their deeds, that they had turned from their evil way" (Jonah 3:10)...

The verse states: "And let them turn, every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands" (Jonah 3:8). What is the meaning of the phrase "and from the violence that is in their hands"? Shmuel said that the king of Nineveh proclaimed: Even if one stole a beam and built it into his building, he must tear down the entire building and return the beam to its owner. (Although the Sages decreed that one need only pay financial compensation in a case of this kind, these people wanted to repent completely by removing any remnant

9. תלמוד בבלי, תענית טז.

אחינו, לא שק ותענית גורמים, אלא תשובה ומעשים טובים גורמים. שכן מצינו באנשי נינוה, שלא נאמר בהם "וירא האלוקים את שקם ואת תעניתם", אלא: "וירא האלוקים את מעשיהם כי שבו מדרכם הרעה"...

"ושובו איש מדרכו הרעה ומן החמס אשר בכפיהם", מאי "ומן החמס אשר בכפיהם"? אמר שמואל: אפילו גזל מריש ובנאו בבירה – מקעקע כל הבירה כולה ומחזיר מריש לבעליו.

of stolen property from their possession).	
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III. Arguments against Nineveh's teshuvah being authentic

10. Against Nineveh's Teshuvah

- Why involve the animals?

וַיִּזְעַק וַיֹּאמֶר בְּנִינָה מִטֶּעַם הַמֶּלֶךְ וּגְדָלְיוֹ לֵאמֹר הָאָדָם וְהַבְּהֵמָה הַבֶּקֶר וְהַצֹּאן אֶל־יִטְעֲמוּ מֵאוֹמָה אֶל־יִרְעוּ וּמִיָּם אֶל־יִשְׁתּוּ:

And he had the word cried through Nineveh: "By decree of the king and his nobles: **No human or animal—of flock or herd**—shall taste anything! They shall not graze, and they shall not drink water!

וַיִּתְכַּסּוּ שָׂקִים הָאָדָם וְהַבְּהֵמָה וַיִּקְרְאוּ אֶל־אֱלֹהִים בְּחִזְקָה וַיָּשֻׁבוּ אִישׁ מִדְרָכּוֹ הָרָעָה וּמִן־הַחֲמָס אֲשֶׁר בְּכַפֵּיהֶם:

They shall be covered with sackcloth—human and animal—and shall cry mightily to God. Let everyone turn back from their own evil ways and from the injustice of which they are guilty. (Yonah 3:7-8)

- What are the people of Nineveh being compared to here?
- Is this external or internal? Sackcloth and fasting or real inner change?
- How long did it last?

11. Talmud Bavli, Ta'anit 16a

The verse states: "But let them be covered with sackcloth, both man and beast" (Jonah 3:8). What did they do? They confined the female animals alone, and their young alone, in a different place. They then said before God: Master of the Universe, if You do not have mercy on us, we will not have mercy on these animals.

11. תלמוד בבלי, תענית טז.

"וַיִּתְכַּסּוּ שָׂקִים הָאָדָם וְהַבְּהֵמָה", מאי הוּוּ עֲבָדִי? אִסְרוּ הַבְּהֵמוֹת לַחֹד, וְאֵת הַזָּרְעוֹת לַחֹד. אָמְרוּ לִפְנֵי: רַבּוֹנוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם! אִם אֵין אַתָּה מְרַחֵם עָלֵינוּ – אֵין אֲנוּ מְרַחֲמִים עַל אֲלוֹ.

12. Yerushalmi Ta'anit 2:1

Rebbi Simeon ben Laqish said, the people of Nineveh repented in trickery. What did they do? Rebbi Huna in the name of Rebbi Simeon ben Halfuta: They put calves inside and their mothers outside, foals inside and their mothers outside; these were mooing from one side and those mooing from the other side. They said, if He does not have mercy on us we shall not have mercy on them...

Each man shall repent his evil ways and robbery in their hands. Rebbi Johanan said, what they had in their hands they returned, what was in a chest, a trunk and a cupboard they did not return.

12. ירושלמי תענית ב:א

אמר רבי שמעון בן לקיש. תשובה שלרמיות עשו אנשי נינוה. מה עשו. רבי חונה בשם רבי שמעון בן חלפותא. העמידו עגלים מבפנים ואימותיהם מבחוץ. סייחים מבפנים ואימותיהם מבחוץ. והוון אילין געיי מן הקא ואילין געיי מן הקא. אמרין. אין לית מתרחם עלינו לינו מרחמין עליהון...

וישבו איש מדרכו הרעה ומן החמס אשר בכפיהם. אמר רבי יוחנן. מה שהיה בכף ידיהם החזירו. מה שהיה בשידה תיבה ומגדל לא החזירו.

13. Yoel 2:

(11) And the LORD roars aloud at the head of His army; for vast indeed is His host, numberless are those that do His bidding. For great is the day of the LORD, most terrible—who can endure it?
(12) “Yet even now”—says the LORD—“Turn back to Me with all your hearts, and with fasting, weeping, and lamenting.”
(13) Rend your hearts rather than your garments, and turn back to the LORD your God. For He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, and renouncing punishment.

13. יואל ב

(11) וְה' נָתַן קוֹלוֹ לִפְנֵי חֵילוֹ כִּי רַב מְאֹד מִחֲנֹהוּ כִּי עֲצוּם עֲשֵׂה דְבָרוֹ כִּי-גָדוֹל יוֹם-ה' וְנוֹרָא מְאֹד וּמִי יִכַּלְנוּ:
(12) וְגַם-עַתָּה נֹאמֶה-ה' שְׁבוּ עַדִּי בְּכָל-לִבְבְּכֶם וּבְצוּם וּבִבְכִי וּבְמִסָּפָד:
(2:) וְקִרְעוּ לִבְבְּכֶם וְאַל-בְּגְדֵיכֶם וּשְׁבוּ אֵלַי אֱלֹקֵיכֶם כִּי-חֲנוּן וְרַחוּם הוּא אֲרֹךְ אַפִּים וְרַב-חֶסֶד וְנָחֵם עַל-הָרָעָה:

IV. Towards a newer understanding of Teshuvah**14. Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 88b-89a**

And Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: When Moses ascended on High to receive the Torah, the ministering angels said before

11. Gemara Shabbat 88b-89a

ואמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: בשעה שעלה משה למרום אמרו מלאכי השרת לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא: רבוננו של עולם, מה לילוד אשה

the Holy One, Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, what is one born of a woman doing here among us? The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to them: He came to receive the Torah. The angels said before Him: The Torah is a hidden treasure that was concealed by You 974 generations before the creation of the world, and You seek to give it to flesh and blood? "What is man that You are mindful of him and the son of man that You think of him?" (Psalms 8:5). Rather, "God our Lord, how glorious is Your name in all the earth that Your majesty is placed above the heavens" (Psalms 8:2).

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Moses: Provide them with an answer...

Moses said before Him: Master of the Universe, the Torah that You are giving me, what is written in it? God said to him: "I am the Lord your God Who brought you out of Egypt from the house of bondage" (Exodus 20:2). Moses said to the angels: Did you descend to Egypt? Were you enslaved to Pharaoh? Why should the Torah be yours? Again Moses asked: What else is written in it? God said to him: "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:3). Moses said to the angels: Do you dwell among the nations who worship idols that you require this special warning? Again Moses asked: What else is written in it? The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him: "Remember the Shabbat day to sanctify it" (Exodus 20:8). Moses asked the angels: Do you perform labor that you require rest from it? Again Moses asked: What else is written in it? "Do not take the name of the Lord your God in vain" (Exodus 20:7), meaning that it is prohibited to swear falsely. Moses asked the angels: Do you conduct business with one another that may lead you to swear falsely? Again Moses

בינינו? אמר להו: לקבל תורה בא. אמרו
לפניו: חמדה גנוזה שגנוזה לך תשע מאות
ושבעים וארבעה דורות קודם שנברא העולם.
אתה מבקש ליתנה לבשר ודם? "מה אנוש כי
תזכרנו וכן אדם כי תפקדנו?" "ה' אדנינו מה
אדיר שמך בכל הארץ אשר תנה הודך על
השמים!"

אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה: החזיר להו
תשובה...

אמר לפניו: רבונו של עולם, תורה שאתה
נותן לי מה כתיב בה? "אנכי ה' אלוהיך אשר
הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים". אמר להו: למצרים
ירדתם? לפרעה השתעבדתם? תורה למה
תהא לכם! שוב: מה כתיב בה? "לא יהיה לך
אלהים אחרים". בין הגוים אתם שרויין,
שעובדין עבודה זרה? שוב: מה כתיב בה?
"זכור את יום השבת לקדשו" – כלום אתם
עושים מלאכה, שאתם צריכין שבות? שוב:
מה כתיב בה? "לא תשא" – משא ומתן יש
ביניכם? שוב: מה כתיב בה? "כבד את אביך
ואת אמך" – אב ואם יש לכם? שוב: מה
כתיב בה? "לא תרצח", "לא תנאף", "לא
תגנב". קנאה יש ביניכם? יצר הרע יש
ביניכם?

מיד הודו לו להקדוש ברוך הוא, שנאמר: "ה'
אדנינו מה אדיר שמך וגו'", ואילו "תנה הודך
על השמים" לא כתיב.

asked: What else is written in it? The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him: “Honor your father and your mother” (Exodus 20:12). Moses asked the angels: Do you have a father or a mother that would render the commandment to honor them relevant to you? Again Moses asked: What else is written in it? God said to him: “You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal” (Exodus 20:13). Moses asked the angels: Is there jealousy among you, or is there an evil inclination within you that would render these commandments relevant?

Immediately they agreed with the Holy One, Blessed be He, that He made the right decision to give the Torah to the people, and as it is stated: “God our Lord, how glorious is Your name in all the earth” (Psalms 8:10), while “that Your majesty is placed above the heavens” is not written (*because the angels agreed with God that it is appropriate to give the Torah to the people on earth*).

V. Further learning:

- באר מרים - יום הכיפורים - ספר יונה
- [ספר יונה - רב יונתן גרוסמן](#)
- Prof. Uriel Simon, JPS Bible Commentary, Jonah
- Dr. Leah Frankel, [פרקים במקרא : דרכים חדשות בפרשנות](#), יונה פרק ג