

Book of Jonah

Chapter I - Responsibility

(v. 1-5) The word of GOD came to Jonah, son of Amittai: Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim judgment upon it; for their wickedness has come before Me.

Jonah started out to flee from GOD. He went down to Jaffa and found a ship going to Tarshish. He paid the fare and went aboard to sail with the others to Tarshish, away from GOD's service.

But GOD cast a mighty wind upon the sea, and such a great tempest came upon the sea that the ship was in danger of breaking up.

The sailors cried out, each to his own god; and they flung the ship's cargo overboard to make it lighter for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the vessel where he lay down and fell asleep.

1. Putting aside the humor in the text for now, and examining it seriously, what is Jonah's motivation in his reluctance to preach in Nineveh?

(v. 7-10) Those aboard said to one another, "Let us cast lots and find out on whose account this misfortune has come upon us." They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. They said to him, "Tell us, what is your business? Where have you come from? What is your country, and of what people are you?"

"I am a Hebrew," he replied. "I worship ADONAI, the GOD of Heaven, who made both sea and land." ...

And the men learned that Jonah was fleeing from GOD's service — for so he told them.

The men were terrified. They said to him, "What must we do to make the sea calm around us?" Jonah answered, "Heave me overboard, and the sea will calm down for you."

The men rowed hard to regain the shore, but they were unable. Then they cried out to GOD: "Oh, please, ADONAI, do not hold us guilty of killing an innocent person!" And they heaved Jonah overboard, and the sea stopped raging. The men feared GOD greatly; they offered a sacrifice to GOD and made vows.

2. Contrast Jonah's behavior with that of the crewmen. What message is being taught here about Responsibility?

Chapter II – Repentance

(v. 1-2) GOD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah; and Jonah remained in the fish's belly three days and three nights. Jonah prayed to ADONAI his God from the belly of the fish.

(v 11) GOD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon dry land.

3. Jonah is a flawed character who did the wrong thing by running away from God. What message is being taught here about Repentance?
4. Does Jonah's repentance meet Rashi's definition of true repentance (true humility, true sincerity, and correcting one's course)? (Teshuvah literally means correcting course)
5. Does Jonah's repentance meet Maimonides' definition of true repentance (forsaking the sin, sincere regret, verbal confession, and resolving never to do it again)?

Chapter 3 – Finally, when given a second chance, Jonah does the right thing:

v. 3 In accordance with GOD's command, Jonah went at once to Nineveh and proclaimed: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his robe, put on sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And the king had the word proclaimed throughout the great city: "By decree of the king No one – human or animal – shall eat, no one shall drink water! They shall be covered with sackcloth and shall cry mightily to GOD. The people of Nineveh believed GOD. A fast was proclaimed, and great and small alike put on sackcloth. And GOD saw how they were turning back from their evil ways. GOD renounced Nineveh's punishment, and did not carry it out.

- Jonah travels to Nineveh, and says,

עוד ארבעים יום ויניקה נהפכת *"Another Forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown."*

- Jonah's prophesy doesn't mention the rationale behind the judgment, or any possibility of salvation. However, we should note that the meaning of the Hebrew word hapak can mean "overthrown," but it could also mean "turned around" or transformed.

6. What message does the text convey about particular/universal nature of God's mercy?

Chapter 4

(v. 1-3) This displeased Jonah greatly, and he was grieved. He prayed to GOD, saying, "O ADONAI! This is exactly what I feared would happen. This is why I initially fled to Tarshish. For I know that You are a compassionate and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, relenting from evil. Please, ADONAI, take my life, for I would rather die than live."

7. If God's mercy is a good thing, why is Jonah so upset/angry?

(v. 5-6) 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.

And Adonai God provided a ricinus plant, [pronounced "rissinuss"] which grew up over Jonah, to provide shade for his head and save him from discomfort. Jonah was extremely happy about the plant.

"Kikayon" – ricinus plant – (King James' folks erroneously translated this word as "gourd.") Also known as castor oil plant – highly prevalent in Middle East and grows spontaneously like a weed. The plant is fast-growing, from seed to four feet high in just 12 to 16 weeks.

The leaves are large palmately-lobed (5-pointed like a human hand) and can easily reach 12 inches in diameter, within say 3-4 months. The leaves are supported by tall sturdy stalks, allowing just a few large leaves to produce an exceptionally wide, dense canopy of shade. The ricinus plant is highly toxic to humans and animals, but is not toxic to certain species of worms/caterpillars, who can easily kill it within a single day by munching it aggressively.

(v. 7-8) But the next day at dawn God provided a worm, which attacked the plant so that it withered overnight. And when the sun rose, God provided a sweltering 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."

8. What is Jonah pretending to be depressed about?

Then GOD said: "You cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. 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 animals as well!"

9. Is this true? Did Jonah 'care' about the plant? Or only the plant's use to HIM?

10. Putting aside for a moment the absurdity of Nineveh changing their ways because they suddenly saw God, what lesson is being taught here about human compassion?

Discussion: Absurdity in the Book of Jonah:

- The ridiculousness of a Hebrew prophet trying to run away from an omnipresent God;
- The illogic of a coward asking innocent fellow travelers to heave him overboard;
- The irony of pagan sailors with more piety and moral integrity than a Hebrew prophet;
- The absurdity of a man being swallowed by a fish, and of surviving 3 days inside the fish;
- An over-the-top mental picture of the city's cows and sheep fasting, refraining from food and water, dressed in sackcloth, and lowing and bleating in repentance to God.
- Jonah's ludicrous mood swings: First, Jonah is so furious that Assyrians' lives were saved that he begs to die. Moments later, he's 'exceedingly glad' about a leafy plant that gives him shade. The very next day, when a worm kills the leafy plant, Jonah collapses back again into a suicidal despair. Boo hoo!
- The wicked King of Nineveh, brutal superpower of the Near East, having remorse, undergoing a complete turnaround, heeding the word of God, humbling himself in the dust.

The Hebrew Bible contains other instances of humor and satire.

- **Judah and his daughter-in-law Tamar (Genesis 38)** Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute to trick Judah into following the sleeping with her according to the mitzvah of levirate, and into giving her his signet as a pledge. Three months later, Tamar is pregnant, and the father is, “the man whose signet I bring.”
- **Pharaoh’s magicians (Exodus 7)** Aaron throws down his staff and it turns into a crocodile. Pharaoh’s magicians replicate the trick But then Aaron’s crocodile swallows all of theirs.
- **Balaam and the donkey (Numbers 22)** On his journey, Balaam's donkey sees the Angel of the Lord standing in the road with a drawn sword, and swerves to avoid it. But Balaam, who is a high-priced sorcerer and seer, but can’t see the Angel, so he starts beating the donkey for not going in a straight line.
- **Story of Ehud and the evil King of Moab (Judges 3)** The left-handed Hebrew warrior Ehud gets the obese enemy king alone in a chamber, stabs him in the belly, killing him and causing his bowels to discharge.
- **Samson the strongman (Judges 16)** The Philistines corner Samson, lock all the gates to the city, post armed guards at the gates, planning to kill him in the morning. But Samson gets up at midnight, breaks the locks, uproots the city gate, hoists the entire 2-ton assembly onto his shoulders and carries it off.
- **David and the foreskins – (I Samuel 18)** King Saul tells David he can marry Saul’s daughter Michal if he comes back from battle with 100 Philistine foreskins. But David relishes the challenge, collects 200 Philistine foreskins, double the dare.
- **The Book of Esther** Evil Haman is forced to honor Mordecai the Jew, with a lavish parade with royal robes that Haman thought would be for HIM. And by the end of the story, Haman is hanged on the very gallows he built intending to execute Mordecai on.
- **Daniel in the Lion’s Den** – Daniel is thrown into a den of hungry lions. But God sends an angel to shut the lions’ mouths, and Daniel gets a peaceful night’s sleep in the lion’s den. Next morning, Daniel emerges unharmed, happily, calmly resting his head on a MANE!

(ch 2 : 3-10) Jonah said:

**(3) In my trouble I called to GOD,
Who answered me;
From the belly of Sheol I cried out,
And You heard my voice.**

**(4) You cast me into the depths,
Into the heart of the sea,
The floods engulfed me;
All Your breakers and billows
Swept over me.**

**(5) I thought I was driven away
Out of Your sight:
Would I ever gaze again
Upon Your holy temple?**

**(6) The waters closed in over me,
The deep engulfed me.
Weeds twined around my head.**

**(7) I sank to the base of the mountains;
The bars of the earth closed upon me forever.
Yet You brought my life up from the pit,
My Eternal GOD!**

**(8) When my life was ebbing away,
I called GOD to mind;
And my prayer came before You,
Into Your holy temple.**

**(9) They who cling to empty folly
Forsake their own welfare,**

**(10) But I, with loud thanksgiving,
Will sacrifice to You;
What I have vowed I will perform.
Deliverance is GOD's!**

- Jonah's prayer evolves in three stages. Verses 3-7 are a crying out in despair, a fear of being abandoned by God. Verses 8-9 express a sudden recall of God's mercy and a turning to hopefulness. In the third phase, verse 10, Jonah expresses gratitude and promises to offer sacrifices of thanksgiving. More importantly he promises to return to Nineveh and perform what God commanded in the first place.