

“So long” vs. “Thanks for all the fish”¹; A New Reading of Sefer Yonah

By Aryeh Klapper

Imagine a man coming into Times Square looking and smelling like he’s spent considerable time inside a fish. The man climbs onto a soapbox and declaims: “The end is nigh!” How many people would pay any attention to him, let alone people of prominence and power?

Sefer Yonah asks us to believe that the cosmopolitan city of Nineveh reacted to such a declaration by engaging in mass repentance to an almost farcical extent, with the king ordering a fast and citizens dressing even their animals in sackcloth as a sign of mourning. The contrast to the impact of prophets on the Children of Israel is stark. In Israel, prophets with extraordinary literary gifts recited immortal religious poetry in the name of a G-d whom the people believed in, and yet they generally had minimal social impact. The temptation is strong to follow my college Creative Writing instructor in reading Sefer Yonah as a satire on the whole notion of effective hortatory prophecy.

I do not propose, however, to surrender to this temptation. Leaving aside the religious implications of such a reading, it ignores a broad range of textual phenomena. On the same ground I will reject any claim that the narrator merely chose to present the content of Yonah’s speech while radically truncating its form. Rather, I will contend that the brevity of Yonah’s speech to Nineveh needs to be understood in the context of his full-length formal song while inside the fish, and of the high rhetoric he employs in conversation with people and G-d. In other words, we need to understand why Yonah refuses to employ his rhetorical gift when speaking to the people of Nineveh, and perhaps also why he nonetheless – or as a result - inspires their repentance.

Now, Yonah’s refusal to speak well to Nineveh seems likely to be a shadow of his initial refusal to speak to Nineveh at all. Let us therefore turn our attention to that refusal.

¹ The title is a play on *So Long and Thanks for all the Fish*, the fourth book of five in Douglas Adams of blessed memory’s “increasingly misnamed Hitchhiker’s Trilogy”. The reference in the original is to a message left by dolphins for humanity along with their present of a copy of Planet Earth, the original having been destroyed to make way for an interstellar bypass.

Sefer Yonah opens with G-d commanding Yonah to *rise* and *cry* against the great city Nineveh “because its evil has come *up* before me”. Yonah instead *rises* to flee² from G-d’s presence. He goes *down* to Yafo, *down* into a ship, *down* to the bowels of the ship, and finally *descends* into trance. Yonah goes down instead of rising to G-d, and so far as we can tell communicates his resignation to G–d exclusively through action.

The beginning of Chapter 3, however, gives a very different picture. “Was this not *my* word while I was still on my land? That is why earlier I fled toward Tarshish, for I knew that You are a G-d gracious and merciful, long to anger and greatly kind, who regrets the bad.” Here Yonah’s flight is presented as following a notification of dissent, as his choice of “my word” over the word of G-d. Why is that notification absent in Chapter 1?

My reading of Chapter 1:?? is that Yonah’s rationale for flight is not merely left out, but rather deliberately censored.

They said to him: “Tell us, please, for what - to whom - this evil is for us; what is your work, and from where will you come? What is your land, and from which nation are you?”

He said to them: “I am a Hebrew, and it is Hashem God of the heavens that I fear, Who made the sea and the dry land.:

The men were frightened with a great fear; they said to him: “What is this that you have done?”
For the men knew that he was fleeing from before Hashem, for he had told them.

They said to him: “What will we do to you, and the sea will quiet from upon us?”
For the sea was continuing to storm.

He said to them: “Pick me up and הטיילני to the sea, and the sea will quiet from upon you,
for I know that it is because of me that this great storm is upon you.”

The men sought a passage to return to the dry land, but they were not able;
for the sea was continuing to storm upon them.

They cried to Hashem; they said: “Please, Hashem, let us please not be lost in trade for the soul of this man, and do not place upon us innocent blood,
for You, Hashem, as You have wished You have done.”

Each verse in this section ends with a prepositional phrase beginning “for”. Only the meaning of the first verse, however, is changed by the “for” clause. The “great fear” that initially seems like the sailors’ reaction to Yonah’s powerful religious witness in 1:?

² What Yonah expects flight to accomplish is unclear, since his statement in 1:9 that Hashem is G-d of land and sea is presumably not a new discovery. The midrashic claim that he sought to escape prophecy by leaving the Land of Israel is attractive, but does not explain why he needed an ocean voyage, and also does not explain how Yonah and Hashem could converse just outside Nineveh at the close of the book.

becomes instead a reaction to his disobedience; “What is this that you have done” changes from an inquiry to an accusation. This awkwardness, followed by such a formally beautiful structure, makes us realize that the narrative deliberately interrupts Yonah’s speech to provide the sailors’ reaction to its climax, then provides the content of that climax anticlimactically.

In other words, the author not only censored Yonah, he wanted readers to notice that Yonah was censored. The interchange with the sailors is thus of a piece with Yonah’s apparent silence at the book’s outset, which we learn in Chapter 3 was not real. My contention is that both omissions serve to prevent us from focusing on the substance of Yonah’s objection. The central theme of Sefer Yonah is the relationship between G-d and His prophet, not the issue between them.

Indeed, without this recognition the plot of the book is a theological travesty. Why does G-d need Yonah to cry against Nineveh? Do not “thousands at His bidding speed and post o’er land and ocean without rest”³? Yonah’s unwillingness to serve should have led simply to his dismissal, and the reassignment of Nineveh to a different prophetic portfolio. Instead the heart of Sefer Yonah is G-d’s pursuit of His prophet, which tells us that the book must be about their relationship.

G-d’s pursuit apparently succeeds. Yonah does obey His second call to cry against Nineveh. But here we must return to Chapter 3’s quotation of Yonah as saying “Was this not my word while I was still on my land?”, which tells us that Yonah’s substantive position has not changed at all⁴. Why, then, does he obey the second call after disobeying the first?⁵

The answer to this question also emerges from a structural analysis. Sefer Yonah is divided into three sections – two units of narrative prose surrounding a unit of poetry. Both units of prose begin with a Divine call. This structure leads us to see the poem as

³ John Milton, “When I Consider How My Light is Spent”

⁴ My analysis here grows out of the brilliant analysis of “gap-filling” in Biblical narrative found in Meir Sternberg’s *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, and it is perhaps in order to acknowledge that almost every aspect of my analysis and appreciation of Tanakh is indebted to that work.

⁵ It is possible to argue that Yonah has simply been intimidated by the fish, that he was prepared to endure death by drowning for the sake of principle, but not death by drowning or piscine life imprisonment. But this reading seems to me to trivialize both prophet and story, and to eliminate the relationship that makes sense of the narrative structure.

the fulcrum around which the action turns, and suggests that the key to Yonah's shift must be contained within the poem.

Here a brief excursus on the role of poetry within Biblical narrative will be helpful. Bracketing problems of definition and of history, we can make the general statement that poetic interjections in Biblical narrative never add objective information necessary for plot. What they do instead is give us subjective perspectives on events that have been narrated objectively in prose. For example, the purpose of the Shirat HaYam is to let us understand how Bnei Yisroel experienced the splitting of the sea. It follows, then, that the poem in Sefer Yonah is there to tell us something about Yonah's perspective on his experiences. When we recall that the narrative earlier contorted itself to avoid giving us Yonah's perspective, this becomes highly significant.

Let us turn then to the poem.

Hashem appointed a great fish toward Yonah; Yonah was in the entrails of the fish three days and three nights.

Yonah prayed to Hashem his God from the entrails of the fish.

He said: I have **cried** from trouble to me toward Hashem; He responded; from the belly of Sheol I pleaded; You heard my voice.

You threw me מְצוּלָה in the heart(s) of seas, and a river surrounded me; all Your breakers and waves upon me passed.

But I had said: I was chased away from opposite Your eyes; instead I will continue to gaze toward Your Holy sanctuary.

Water overlapped me until it endangered my soul, the deep surrounded me; reeds saddled my head.

To the ends of hills I descended; the land barred my way for eternity; but You caused my life to ascend from *shachat*, Hashem my G-d.

When my soul went faint on me, It was Hashem that I remembered, and my prayer came to you, to your holy palace,

Those who stand watch for meaningless hot air; they will abandon the objects of their chesed.

But I, with a sound of gratitude I will sacrifice to you; that which I swore I will repay. Salvation belongs to G-d!"

A reasonable expectation for the poem in context would be for it to contain descriptions of the claustrophobic insides of the fish and pleas to be removed from it. But it actually contains none of that – rather, it expresses Yonah's thanks to Hashem for saving him from drowning, and his joy that, contrary to previous fears, he will be able to

continue in G-d's presence. These are strange sentiments for someone who has fled G-d's presence willingly and apparently chosen death over what would be necessary to return to it.

One more point. Since Yonah, so far as we are told, never prays to leave the fish, why does G-d have the fish vomit him out? Note well that the text nowhere claims that G-d instructed the fish to vomit him out in response to a request from Yonah, but that it is nonetheless clear that the instruction comes only after G-d hears the poem. I argue as follows: If G-d has the fish vomit Yonah out, it must be that Yonah is no longer defying G-d, that G-d knows that Yonah will obey the second Divine call.

If Yonah did not ask to be released – and note the somewhat contemptuous description of him as being regurgitated, in stark contrast to the poem's lyric of salvation – it follows that just as Yonah previously preferred death to obedience, he still prefers being inside the fish to obedience. But he no longer sees himself justified in disobeying a Divine command. What changes between Chapter 1 and Chapter 3 is not Yonah's disagreement with the command, but rather his understanding of it as binding.

I suggest that Yonah initially conceives of prophecy as an entirely one-way communication, with the prophet's only role being to understand what G-d wants, then salute and obey. He does not see prophets as having any role in choosing or defining their tasks. But Yonah believes strongly that power is not a sufficient basis for obeying G-d, that even ultimate might does not make right. He does not see why fear should lead to worship or service, and he assumes that G-d had no interest in human beings other than to command them. Certainly G-d has no interest in human opinions.

So when Yonah is assigned a mission that he disagrees with, he sees no option other than resignation. He tries to run away from G-d's presence, to end the prophetic relationship, in the hope that G-d will simply let him go. When G-d sends the storm, he understands with equanimity that his resignation has not been accepted, and prepares to die.

But Yonah is a deeply religious man, for whom awe of G-d is a dominant emotion. It is not easy for him to walk away from the core of his identity. His disobedience is the rebellion of the religious zealot rather than of the skeptic or secularist. He disobeys G-d, but only for G-d's sake.

Chazal convey this insight in a brilliant exegetical move by identifying Yonah ben Amitai, son of Truth, as the boy resurrected by Eliyahu⁶. Eliyahu's relationship with G-d is marked by his refusal to tell G-d what He wants to hear, and as the Talmud compellingly reads II Kings, by continual efforts to force His hand⁷. Yonah believes – as does the midrash – that G-d is, kibiyakhol, capable of self-deception, that his love of human beings causes to overlook their true nature⁸.

So when Yonah is commanded to go to Nineveh, he knows how his mission will likely end. He will give a stirring speech, the people of Nineveh will repent briefly, G-d will repent of punishing them and forgive their past sins, and the whole cycle will start over again. G-d will accept shallow service rooted entirely in fear, but Yonah wants no part of it. It may even be that Yonah has a deeply humanist motive for objecting. He may see G-d's acceptance of shallow repentance as a diminution of human dignity, as a statement that ultimately what we do matters little to Him.⁹

So Yonah resigns, not as a gesture of protest but because he can do nothing else. When the storm comes, he may even welcome the opportunity to die, as the willing service of G-d that had previously justified his life¹⁰ has been ripped away.. But then G-d sends the fish.

The fish has two meanings. On the one hand, it tells Yonah that attempted escape is futile, that he cannot die and thereby avoid confronting the paradox of deriving all value from G-d but rejecting G-d's values; the cuneiform symbol for Nineveh was a fish. On the other hand, it tells Yonah that G-d values Yonah's speech. G-d says to him: I will maintain a relationship with you even when we disagree, and I will listen to and consider your opinion; why else would I bother to rescue you from drowning? Disagreement does

⁶ In II Kings 17. Eliyahu had been sent to a widow's house to experience the suffering caused by a famine he had decreed. When he fails to learn the lesson, as the Talmud understands the story, G-d kills the widow's son to force him to trade in the key of rain for that of resurrection. Eliyahu then resurrects the child, and the drought ends.

⁷ See my "The Temptation of Normalcy: A Spiritual Psychobiography of Eliyahu HaNavi"

⁸ Note that Yonah's bitter list of Divine attributes in 4:2 pointedly leaves out "Truth".

⁹ In this regard see Rav Dessler on Rabbi Akiva's agonizing martyrdom as evidence that he received the ultimate reward of being allowed to try to live in a world without Divine Mercy, in which all human actions have their just consequences.

¹⁰ Remember that according to the midrash he was saved miraculously while all around him died of drought; Yonah's life requires far more justification than does the average person's.

not lead to execution or even excommunication, but rather to dialogue. So Yonah is given a real option – he can argue with G-d.

Yonah accepts, but he understands what acceptance implies. To engage in a decision process voluntarily initiated by a party that could act unilaterally, and wish that party bound by the outcome, means that one must genuinely accept the outcome of that process. G-d's only motive for listening to human beings, for giving human beings the chance to change His mind, is His desire for their willing obedience.¹¹ So Yonah recognizes that if he cannot convince G-d, he must obey Him.

So Yonah goes to Nineveh. He does so while still deeply opposed to his mission, and thus this eloquent poet walks into the Assyrian Times Square looking like he's been vomited out of a fish and says, essentially, "Repent for the end is nigh!" Never has a prophet tried harder to fail.

I see Yonah as powerfully relevant to an aspect of the relationship many Modern Orthodox Jews have – to varying extents - with Halakhah. We too experience the power and beauty of Torah to the point that we cannot imagine ourselves without it, and yet many of us find particular halakhic rulings deeply troubling, not because they infringe on our own desires, but because they violate our image and experience of a just Divinity.

If Halakhah were a purely heteronomous phenomenon – if the Law were given to us cut and dried to the point where there was no room for human discretion and interpretation¹², then perhaps we would be justified in rebelling and accepting the consequences. But it was not – G-d gave us an open Torah precisely so we could be partners in its creation, remembering all the while that our task is to fathom and obey His true will. We are eligible for partnership only so long as we obey our best current understanding of His Will, even if we wish it different.

This procedural point is critical not only theologically but to the relationship of klal Yisroel to her poskim. If individuals sense that poskim have no interest in their opinions and values, or if subcommunities sense the same about the broad halakhic

¹¹ In other words, G-d chooses to compel participation in a decision process rather than direct obedience to His decisions. Obviously, the process works only if both sides are genuinely open to persuasion. In this article I am not dealing with the philosophic problem of how G-d can change his mind, but simply saying kibi yakhol; I hope to address it in another context, very likely in a discussion of Yirmiyahu.

¹² Cf. Masekhet Soferim 16:5

community¹³, they will – sometimes legitimately - not feel bound by their decisions. It is therefore a particular responsibility for poskim and the halakhic community to listen to the voices of those who feel most disenfranchised. But when our poskim and/or our halakhic community listen and yet disagree, it is our job to obey, even if we have to grit our teeth to do so.¹⁴

The irony is that sometime mitzvot performed with gritted teeth are the most powerful¹⁵. Had Yonah walked into Nineveh in full rhetorical flourish, there is no reason to assume that lyric poetry would have been any more effective in Assyria than it was in Israel. Perhaps what overawed and inspired Nineveh was the power of watching someone perform their duty to G-d, of seeing someone genuinely subordinate their will to His¹⁶.

Nonetheless, this state of moral tension is not an ideal, and likely not long-term sustainable. When Nineveh indeed repents, and G-d as predicted forgives them, it turns out that for Yonah G-d's presence is not enough to overcome his sense of personal violation at having participated in a fraud.

G-d tried repeatedly to make Yonah appreciate His word. He allowed Yonah to board the ship, and then sent the storm, so that Yonah could experience firsthand the foxhole repentance of the sailors, and see that it was not without its genuineness, and that idolaters can have the virtue of resisting murder – however briefly - even at the risk of their own lives. But Yonah's a priori convictions as to how the world should be run could not be overcome¹⁷

¹³ On this see my “The Halakhic Rights of Ideological Minorities”

¹⁴ My wife notes that my contention that the relationship between Halakhah and community, or Halakhah and halakhically observant individual, is parallel to that between G-d and prophet, depends on the community or individual's acknowledgement that halakhic decisions with which they disagree are nonetheless the voice of G-d. I think this follows ineluctably from an acceptance that the Torah's command of *lo tasur* binds us to a decision process rather than to specific content.

¹⁵ When I served as Rabbinic Adviser to the Orthodox Minyan at Harvard Hillel, some well-meaning zealots would sometimes challenge the sincerity of my community's observance on the grounds of their feminist or other ideological convictions. I generally replied that observance in accordance with one's own opinions and preferences says far less about one's *kabbalat ol mitzvot* than observance in conflict with them.

¹⁶ My wife comments that she has never seen “Acceptance of the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven” more deeply expressed than at the circumcision of children whose parents' every autonomous fiber sees the practice as barbaric.

¹⁷ Here again, the identification of Yonah as the boy resurrected by Eliyahu is powerful. Yonah is the child of mercy, the one chink in Eliyahu's armor of total devotion to G-d. He might have reacted against Eliyahu

G-d's final effort to convince Yonah is peculiar. He causes a vine to grow that shades Yonah from the hot sun outside Nineveh, then kills the vine the next day. When Yonah expresses anger about the death of the vine, G-d argues that His attachment to and investment in the Ninevites is much greater than Yonah's to the vine, and thus he is compelled or at least entitled to save them. The analogy fails, of course, because the vine has done nothing to deserve destruction.

I mention the weakness of the analogy only to strengthen us against yet another interpretational temptation. Since G-d is given the last word, we might say, perhaps he convinces Yonah, and prophet and Divinity speak amicably ever after. But the last word of the book is not actually the last word of the dialogue.

The close of Chapter 3 tells us that, in the aftermath of Yonah's declaration to the Ninevites that their end was nigh, a mass repentance on their part convinces G-d to cancel their punishment. At the start of Chapter 4, Yonah conveys to G-d his deep displeasure with this. G-d says in response only "Have you become angry for good reason?" Following this, Yonah leaves the city "until he would see what would be in the city". But since G-d had already told him that nothing would happen, what was Yonah waiting for?

Possibly Yonah is waiting for to see whether the Ninevites' emergency repentance will be sustained. Ibn Ezra however, suggests that the narrative is out of order, that the dialogue at the beginning of Chapter 4 takes place *after* Yonah has left the city. The chronological record of the conversation between G-d and Yonah accordingly is as follows.

Yonah left the city and settled to the east of the city. He made a booth there for himself, and he sat underneath it in the shade, until he would see what would be in the city. Hashem appointed a gourd-vine, and it *ascended above* Yonah to be a shade over his head to shade him from his *ra*. Yonah rejoiced over the gourd-vine a great rejoicing. Hashem appointed a worm at the *rise* of dawn the next day. It struck the gourd-vine and it dried out.

When the sun shone, G-d appointed a burning east wind. The sun struck on the head of Yonah and he fainted. He asked his soul to die, and said "My dying is better than my living."

G-d said to Yonah: "Are you angry for good reason about the gourd-vine?"

He replied: "I am angry for good reason, to the point of death."

and justified all human beings – perhaps that is what G-d is hoping he will become. But instead, this midrash may be arguing, he seeks to outdo Eliyahu's devotion to strict justice.

Hashem said: You had pity for the gourd-vine, which you did not labor over or nurture, which came into being overnight and was lost overnight – should I not have pity for Nineveh the great city, which has in it more than 120,000 people who do not know their right from their left, and much cattle?

Yonah experienced a great *ra* (wrongness), and he was very angry.

He prayed to Hashem and said: “Please, Hashem – was this not my word while I was still on my earth. That was why I originally fled toward Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and merciful divinity, long to anger and of great lovingkindness, Who changes his mind with regard to *ra* (causing bad things to happen). Now, Hashem, please take my soul from me, for my dying is better than my living.”

Hashem said to him: “Are you angry for good reason?”

This ordering makes clear, as the formal end of the book does not, that Yonah is *never* convinced by G-d. The joy of relating to the Divine is once more insufficient. And so Yonah asks again for death, this time directly at the hands of G-d. The elated “Thanks for all the fish” becomes a dejected request for a final “so long”.

Relationships that address ultimate issues are not panaceas, and profound religiosity can lead to profound depression and frustration. Indeed, suicidal ideation seems almost an occupational hazard of prophecy. As the Rav strikingly declared¹⁸, the Lord as shepherd Who makes us lie down in green pastures is a fantasy rarely achieved by the deeply religious in this world.

But communities need joy to survive, and Modern Orthodoxy cannot be built on constant moral self-denial. It is true that as subjects of Halakhah, our foremost duty is to find ways to obey even when our opinions are not followed. But as creators of Halakhah, we must work to make sure that every halakhically committed voice is genuinely heard. As stewards of Torah who seek to make halakhah a live option for every Jew, we must understand and acknowledge that obedience can be difficult for reasons other than self-interest, and make every effort to let the voices of our religiously passionate rebels find authentic expression in the practice of our community.

In other words – like Yonah, we must go to Nineveh whether we like it or not. But in *imitatio dei*, we should not ignore those who refuse to come with us. Rather, we should send storms, and fish, and sheltering vines, and miraculous resurrections, and whatever else we have at our disposal to start a genuine conversation with them. If,

¹⁸ Halakhic Man, footnote 75?

having listened, we are not convinced, we can be confident that Yonah's degree of certainty and single-issue identity are rare, and pray that the joy of human and Divine relationship combined will nonetheless inspire them to full participation, as subjects and creators, in the halakhic process.