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Jonah Struggles with God's Compassion

Jonah is resentful when God is ready to forgive the wicked city of Nineveh, and his book ends with God trying to change Jonah's perspective. Whether or not God was successful, on Yom Kippur we read the words of Micah (7:18–20) as if Jonah finally accepts God's compassionate nature.

Prof. Jack M. Sasson



Jonah under His Gourd, Maarten van Heemskerck, 1561. The Royal Collection Trust.

Mid-afternoon on Yom Kippur, Judaism's holiest day; having fasted for almost 20 hours, a worshipper chants the entire Book of Jonah during the afternoon (*mincha*) service.^[1] The hope is that the book's message of divine mercy for obdurate sinners may rekindle God's compassion toward those who have strayed from the straight path.

The well-structured story is well known: Jonah is dumped at sea when escaping his charge to deliver God's message to Nineveh (ch. 1); he composes a psalm of remorse inside a fish (ch. 2); he foretells Nineveh's doom, prompting its contrition (ch. 3); he is peeved and is lectured on the incapacity of mortals to understand God (ch. 4).

Despite its brevity (fewer than 700 words), the tale shifts scenes readily: It features a prophet but gives him the briefest message to convey; it relishes confrontations but turns to baroque devices to

resolve them; it parcels out realism and surrealism in (almost) equal measure; and it whimsically cites animals when dispensing profundities.

Jonah's Two Missions

In the book of Jonah, God has the first and last words. The first leads the prophet to dodge a mission:

יִוְנָה אֶסְמִיתִי יְיָהוָה אֶל יוֹנָה בֶּן אֲמִתַּי
Jonah 1:1 When YHWH's command to Jonah b. Amittay
לָאמַר. was...

The phrase *וְיָהִי דְבַר יְיָהוָה*, “when YHWH’s command was,” does not normally open prophetic or historical books; rather, it initiates episodes about prophets sent on missions.^[2] We might therefore presume that what we are reading about Jonah and his westward flight toward Tarshish is just one installment among other Jonah adventures heard in ancient Israel. We can verify this assumption when the same phrasing launches Jonah on yet another journey, this time eastward toward Nineveh:

יִוְנָה גַּם יְיָהוָה אֶל יוֹנָה שְׁנִית לָאמַר.
Jonah 3:1 When once more YHWH’s command to Jonah
was...

An adverb, *שְׁנִית*, “once more,” is added to patch together the two destinations. Jonah, therefore, may well have had several adventures; but sometime in the (post-)exilic period, a few of them were merged successfully into the book that has been read on Yom Kippur since the mid-first millennium C.E.^[3]

Linkage

Several means integrate these two parallel tales, among them:

- Placing the only named character, Jonah, in each major scene;
- Citing Nineveh in all but the second chapter;
- Having Jonah recall in the final episode thoughts he (allegedly) had in the first one (at 1:2–3)—*הֲלוֹא זֶה דְּבַרִּי עַד הַיּוֹם עַל אֲדַמְתִּי*, “this certainly was my opinion, while yet in my own homeland” (4:2);
- Registering the voice of God at major turns of events;
- Distributing marvels in each section; and
- Allocating essential vocabulary and uncommon conjugations across several segments.^[4]

None of these techniques, however, proves as crucial to the coordination of events as the tweaking of one idiom in the two commands God gives Jonah.

Destroying or Warning Nineveh

Both commands begin with God telling Jonah: *קוּם לֵךְ אֶל-נִינְוָה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה*, “Set out for Nineveh, that large city.” Once directed toward Nineveh, however, Jonah is to carry out radically different missions. In the first, he is to trek to a distant megalopolis, notorious for its crimes, and announce that the Hebrew god has decided to terminate it:

יונה א:ב קום לך אל נינוה העיר הגדולה וקרא
 עליה כי עלתה רעתם לפני.
 Jonah 1:2 “Set out for Nineveh, that large city, and
 declare doom upon it; the wickedness of its citizens is
 obvious to me.” [5]

This is not the most sensible task to charge a prophet whose own god has hardly matched the success that Assur, Nineveh’s god, has had in delivering victories to his people. We all know that Jonah answers with a ticket to ride in the opposite direction.

In the second, Jonah is still to go to Nineveh, but this time he is to make the proclamation that God is delivering through him:[6]

יונה ג:ב קום לך אל נינוה העיר הגדולה וקרא
 אליה את הקריאה אשר אנכי דבר אליה.
 Jonah 3:2 “Set out for Nineveh, that large city, and report
 to it the message I tell you.”

The verb of commission in both commands is the same, קרא, with the meanings “to call, shout out (hence also read), proclaim,” or the like. But when construed with different prepositions (על, “upon” at 1:2 and אל, “toward” at 3:2), the resultant idioms can achieve radically different senses.[7]

We are not told why God alters his approach. A few days in the belly of a fish have obviously transformed Jonah, however, for he delivers his charge with alacrity, on the first day of arrival. His message is likely the shortest in prophetic history—just 5 words:

יונה ג:ד ויחל יונה לבוא בעיר מהלך יום אחד
 ויקרא ויאמר עוד ארבעים יום ונינוה נהפכת.
 Jonah 3:4 Hardly had Jonah gone into town a day’s
 journey when he called out, “Forty more days, and
 Nineveh (becomes) נהפכת.”

I have not translated the relevant word because its construction (a *niphal* participle of הפך) allows for two contrasting meanings: Nineveh could “overturn” (= “be undone, destroyed”) or “turn over” (= “be rehabilitated”).

This ambiguity has been debated since Talmudic times. For example:

בבלי סנהדרין פט: לא ידע אי לטובה אי לרעה.
 b. Sanh. 89b [Jonah] did not know if [the sentence] would
 be *for the good* [as their corruption would be
 overturned through repentance], or *for the bad* [as the
 city would be overturned through destruction]. [8]

The Ninevites have only one understanding of the prophecy—as “destroyed.” They therefore take prompt, extraordinary, and desperate actions to escape their doom. Jonah, too, foresees only devastation for the city, if only because God had previously cited Nineveh’s evil ways (at 1:2). We too might think the same, because the identical root (ה.פ.ך) is used when God overturns Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:21, 25, 29; Deut 29:22; and elsewhere), cities whose depravity had become proverbial.

Game of Words

What Jonah does not realize (nor do many of us when reading his book on Yom Kippur) is that the language God has him bring to Nineveh is amphibolous, capable of two meanings, so that whatever will happen to Nineveh—destruction or deliverance—is already encoded in Jonah’s words.

Nonetheless, what eventually transpires—Nineveh’s salvation—must not be attributed to blind fate; it was foreordained by a precognitive and omniscient God who also knows well how to play word games. Still, Jonah’s failure to understand the subtlety of his own language will lead to the great confrontation in the final chapter.

The Confrontation

Unlike the previous episodes that may well have had oral lives, the last chapter is certainly a learned composition, not least because of the precisely balanced number of words in the exchanges assigned to the two protagonists,^[9] God and Jonah:

4:2–3	Jonah’s monologue	39 words
4:4	God’s query (unanswered)	3 words
4:8	Jonah’s query (<i>sotto voce</i>)	3 words
4:9	dialogue: God	5 words
	dialogue: Jonah	5 words
4:10–11	God’s monologue	39 words

A vexed Jonah alleges to have diagnosed God’s magnanimity long before he headed to Tarshish:

יונה ד׳ב וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל אֶל־יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר אָנָּה יְהוָה הֲלוֹא זֶה דְבָרִי עַד הַיּוֹמִי עַל אֲדָמָתִי עַל כֵּן קִדַּמְתִּי לְבָרַח תַּרְשִׁישָׁה כִּי יָדַעְתִּי כִּי אַתָּה אֵל חַנּוּן וָרַחוּם אַרְךָ אַפַּיִם וְרַב חֶסֶד וְנָחָם עַל הַרְעָה.	Jonah 4:2 He prayed to YHWH, saying, “Please, O YHWH, this certainly was my opinion, while yet in my own homeland; accordingly, I planned to flee toward Tarshish because I realized then that you are a gracious and compassionate God, very patient and abundantly benevolent, who would also relent from punishment.”
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Having eagerly accepted his mission the second time around, he was only to be deceived. Feeling misused, he incongruously asks the god he had just praised as compassionate and merciful to kill him:

יונה ד׳ג וַעֲתָה יְהוָה קַח נָא אֶת נַפְשִׁי מִמֶּנִּי כִּי טוֹב מוֹתִי מִחַיִּי.	Jonah 4:3 “Now then, O YHWH, take away life from me, because for me death is better than life.”
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Jonah, it seems, has enough chutzpah to presume that his threat will successfully goad God into annihilating Nineveh:

יונה ד:ה וַיֵּצֵא יוֹנָה מִן הָעִיר וַיֵּשֶׁב מִקְדָּם לָעִיר
וַיַּעַשׂ לוֹ שֵׁם סִכָּה וַיֵּשֶׁב תַּחְתֶּיהָ בְּצֶל עֵד אֲשֶׁר
יִרְאֶה מֶה יִהְיֶה בְּעִיר.
Jonah 4:5 Jonah then left the city, but remained just east
of it. He made himself a shelter there and, sitting
beneath it in the shade, he waited to see what would
happen to the city.

When the wondrous *qiqayon* plant—never mind its nature—sprouts to shade his shelter, Jonah has every reason to feel worthy of God’s trust:

יונה ד:ו וַיֹּמַן יְיָהוָה אֱלֹהִים קִיקְיֹון וַיַּעַל מֵעַל
לְיוֹנָה הַגִּידוֹת צֶל עַל רֹאשׁוֹ לְהַצִּיל לוֹ מִרְעָתוֹ
וַיִּשְׂמַח יוֹנָה עַל הַקִּיקְיֹון שֶׁמָּחָה גְדוֹלָה.
Jonah 4:6 In order to deliver him from his distress,
YHWH-God directed a *qiqayon* plant, that then rose
above Jonah to form a shade over his head. Jonah was
absolutely delighted over the *qiqayon* plant.

A series of divinely launched disasters, however, disabuse Jonah of his fantasy: a worm kills the *qiqayon*; a fierce wind carries away the shelter; the sun is merciless; Jonah swoons and again voices a hope to die (vv. 7–8).

In a final soliloquy, God tries to reason with him, offering an argument that draws us into its (dubious) logic:

יונה ד:י וַיֹּאמֶר יְיָהוָה אַתָּה חִסַּתָּ עַל הַקִּיקְיֹון
אֲשֶׁר לֹא עֲמַלְתָּ בוֹ וְלֹא גִדַּלְתּוֹ שֶׁבֶן לַיְלָה הָיָה
וּבֶן לַיְלָה אָבַד. ד:יא וַאֲנִי לֹא אָחוּס עַל נִינְוָה
הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה אֲשֶׁר יֵשׁ בָּהּ הֲרַבָּה מִשָּׂתִים
עֶשְׂרֵה רְבוֹ אָדָם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יָדַע בֵּין יְמִינוֹ
לְשִׁמְאֵלוֹ וּבִהְמָה רְבָה.
Jonah 4:10 YHWH then said, “You yourself were fretting
over the *qiqayon* plant, on which you did not labor, nor
did you cultivate it, a plant that came up one night and
perished the next; ^{4:11} yet I myself am not to have
compassion on Nineveh, that large city, where there are
more than twelve myriads of human beings, who cannot
discern between their right and left hands, and animals
galore?”^[10]

(Lost) Response

It is too bad that we do not have Jonah’s response, for he might have set God straight on several matters: First, contrary to God’s assertion, Jonah hardly cared about the *qiqayon*’s fate and so could not link the brevity of its life to potentially that of human existence. Why would God have him lament the withering of a plant when a powerful wind and a hot sun played no lesser roles in creating his severe discomfort? How could God treat his servant so scornfully?

Second, does omniscient God not know that Nineveh will resume its predatory behavior once its acts of penitence are memory? Finally, has God not suspected that the target of forgiveness Jonah anticipated as he was boarding a Tarshish-bound ship (4:2) might apply not just to Nineveh but to a recalcitrant

prophet as well?

Coda

These are among similar kvetches that Jonah might have voiced had another of his adventures been preserved. They are surely not too out of character for someone of Jonah's temper. In Jewish lore there is no lack of fanciful complications that Jonah experienced in his post-Nineveh life, several directly resulting from bad judgments or from efforts to redeem his wounded pride.^[11]

Still, to contrast with the kind of brazen comebacks I have foisted on Jonah, it is good to cite one from the several midrashim on his book:

מדרש יונה באותה שעה נפל יונה על פניו ואמר
 הנהג עולמך במדת הרחמים דכתיב לה' אלהינו
 הרחמים והסליחות.

Midr. Jonah At that very moment, [Jonah] fell flat on his face saying, "Direct your world according to the attribute of mercy, as is written, "To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness"" (Dan 9:9).^[12]

Since the late Middle Ages—not a particularly happy period for many Jews—the reading of Jonah on Yom Kippur ends with a passage from Micah:

מיכה ז:יח מי אל כְּמוֹד נִשְׂא עֵז וְעִבֵר עַל פְּשַׁע
 לְשֹׂאֲרֵי נִחְלָתוֹ לֹא הִחְזִיק לְעַד אִפּוֹ כִּי חָפֵץ
 חֶסֶד הוּא. ז' יֵשׁ יָשׁוּב יִרְחַמְנוּ יִכַּבֵּשׁ עֲוֹנוֹתֵינוּ
 וְתִשְׁלִיךְ בְּמַצְלוֹת יָם כָּל חַטָּאוֹתֵם.

Mic 7:18 Who equals you as a god, in removing iniquity and disregarding transgression from what remains of his bequest [Israel]? He does not perpetuate anger endlessly, for he is indeed desirous of benevolence.^{7:19} Once again [God] will be compassionate with us, obliterating our iniquity. You will hurl into the deepest sea all their trespasses.^[13]

The verses from Micah reinforce the sentiments attributed to Jonah without raising any of the potentially troubling follow-ups I have just offered. Incomparable grace, they insist, is forever there to be had even by the most obdurate offenders.

Comforting words indeed.

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Footnotes

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[1] For justification and amplification of arguments developed here, consult my commentary, *Jonah: A New*

Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Interpretations, Anchor Yale Bible 24b (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

[2] For example, once Elijah enters the scene, this is the formula that sets him off on subsequent moves:

מלכים א יח:א ויהי ימים רבים ודבר יְהוָה הָיָה
 אֶל אֱלֹהֵיו בְּשָׁנָה הַשְּׁלִישִׁית לֵאמֹר לְךָ הָרָאָה
 אֶל אַחָאָב וְאֶתְּנָה מָטָר עַל פְּנֵי הָאָדָמָה.
 1 Kgs 18:1 Much later, in the third year [of the drought],
 when YHWH's command to Elijah was: "Go, appear
 before Ahab; then I will send rain upon the earth..."

[3] See Sasson, *Jonah*, 28.

[4] For more on these features of the integrated text, see Sasson, *Jonah*, 19–20.

[5] Since no other town shares the same name as Nineveh, which in the Bible is mostly described in negative terms, mentioning its size could hardly be to identify it as the Assyrian metropolis. Rather, this attribute is later developed to sharpen the enthusiasm with which Jonah eventually delivers his prophecy:

יונה ג:ג ויקם יונה וילך אל נינוה כדבר יְהוָה
 ונינוה היתה עיר גדולה לאלהים מהלך שלשת
 ימים. ג:ד ויחל יונה לבוא בעיר מהלך יום אחד
 ויקרא ויאמר עוד ארבעים יום ונינוה נהפכת.
 Jonah 3:3 Jonah did set out to Nineveh, complying with
 YHWH's wish. (Nineveh was a large city for/to God,
 requiring three days to cross.) 3:4 Hardly had Jonah
 gone into town a day's journey when he called out,
 "Forty more days, and Nineveh (becomes) נְהַפְכֶת."

Still further, its size substantiates the teeming populations of people and beasts said to be in it (4:11).

[6] The Greek version tries to make linkage with God's previous order by inserting κατὰ τὸ κήρυγμα τὸ ἔμπροσθεν, ὃ ἐγὼ ἐλάλησα πρὸς σέ, "according to the former proclamation that spoke to you." Editor's note: For a different interpretation God's second command to go to Nineveh, see Jonathan Magonet, "[Jonah's Recalcitrant Prayer](#)," *The Torah* (2014).

[7] Think of the different meanings achieved in English when "to call" is construed with on, out, off, in, forth, back, etc.

[8] Accessed via [Sefaria](#), trans. William Davidson ed., with modifications.

[9] Jonah's grievance likely knows, and plays with, several iterations of biblical sentiments that especially allude to God's attributes of mercy; see Sasson, *Jonah*, 275–283.

[10] At its pinnacle of power, Nineveh had at least twice the number of inhabitants than the 120,000 God estimates for it. See the discussion of this estimate in Sasson, *Jonah*, 311–312.

[11] I draw on several Jonah *midrashim* in proposing the above-conjured Jonah reactions. For this lore, see my Jonah commentary, p. 320, or—better yet—the pages on Jonah in Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society, 2003), II:1031–1035.

[12] Midrash Jonah, version 1.3, in *Otzar Midrashim*, ed. Judah Eisenstein (New York, 1915); accessed via [Sefaria](#).

[13] The Masoretic Text of Micah 7:19 has תְּשׁוּבוֹתָם, "their trespasses," but the emendation into "our" is found

already in the Septuagint.



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