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## THE BOOK OF JONAH: A CALL TO PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

**T**he Talmud (*Megilla* 14a) states that the biblical text was written for all generations. Not simply a chronology of Israel's earliest experiences, the Bible presents universal prophetic truths which have guided the religious lives of committed Jews and people of other faiths for millennia.<sup>1</sup> Every biblical narrative has its educational purposes.

In studying the book of *Jonah*, the basic story line is a gateway to the universal truths and deeper meanings found in the text. Even on the simplest level, *Jonah* is an appropriate reading for Yom Kippur. Repentance, God's forgiveness, the impossibility of fleeing from God, and other major religious themes permeate this succinct tale. On fast days, leaders of communities followed the simple reading of *Jonah*, citing God's forgiveness for Nineveh as the classic example of His clemency towards penitents.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Radak draws lessons from the simple reading of *Jonah*: If non-Jews repent, certainly Jews should; and God accepts the penance of people from any background. Yet, the usual lessons derived from a superficial reading of *Jonah* leave the careful reader with a host of unanswered questions, as they do not provide (nor do they attempt to provide) a comprehensive picture of the details of the story.

Just as human awareness is multilayered, including the fully conscious and the subconscious, so too biblical texts present readers with multifaceted accounts which can be understood in several dimensions simultaneously. Here, we will consider the text of *Jonah* in light of several Midrashim and commentaries sensitive to the prophet's inner life and reflective of a comprehensive picture of *Jonah*. *Jonah* is willing to present even a prophet as having passive characteristics, an attribute of all people in varying degrees. The subtle details in the laconic text help the reader delineate some aspects of passivity, most significantly, the ability often to ignore realities about oneself in order to maintain a satisfactory self-image. The study of Jonah's biblical career encourages the

reader to lead an active and profoundly honest religious life, a message fitting for Yom Kippur.<sup>3</sup>

## I: JONAH AND THE SAILORS

God orders Jonah to go on a prophetic mission to Nineveh. Jonah flees, finding a ship heading for Tarshish. After the boat leaves the port of Jaffa, God sends a great storm which prompts every sailor to pray to his respective deity, but Jonah has fallen fast sleep.<sup>4</sup> After the captain asks Jonah to pray, the sailors draw lots; Jonah is picked out and confesses that he is fleeing from God. He tells the terrified mariners that the tempest will subside if they cast him overboard. After valiant efforts to save themselves without resorting to this measure, the sailors throw Jonah overboard. The storm ceases. The sailors pray to God, making vows and offering sacrifices. Let us now take a closer look at the chapter, focusing on Jonah's puzzling behavior.

When God assigns Jonah to his mission, the prophet flees to Tarshish. The general explanation of this ostensibly absurd reaction is that Jonah is fleeing Israel since God does not give prophecy outside of Israel.<sup>5</sup> This explanation appears difficult, however, since Jonah *does* receive prophecy near Nineveh in chapter four!<sup>6</sup> Additionally, Moses and Jeremiah, midrashically associated with Jonah in their initial reluctance to prophesy,<sup>7</sup> forthrightly protest to God (not to mention that both subsequently accept their missions). Jonah, on the other hand, tries to evade his mission without so much as a response.<sup>8</sup>

Many commentators justify Jonah's actions by explaining that Nineveh is the capital of Assyria,<sup>9</sup> a rising power which ultimately will exile the Northern Kingdom of Israel (see II Kings 17:1-6). Jonah, because of his love for his people, prefers to forfeit his own life by failing to transmit his message (the penalty for stifling prophecy is death through divine agency<sup>10</sup>) so that the Assyrians will not repent. God will then destroy them, and they no longer will be able to conquer Israel. Alternatively, one could say that Jonah, as a prophet of Israel, sees the idolatrous ways of his people. If gentiles repent, then the Israelites will look worse by contrast.

Elyakim Ben-Menahem (*Da'at Mikra*) suggests that Jonah opposes the concept of repentance altogether. The prophet thinks that if wicked people suffer immediate retribution for their wrongdoings, they will not sin as much. Alternatively, Jonah wants to understand God's ways, and repentance makes matters too subjective for even the greatest of prophets

to comprehend (see J. T. *Makkot* 2:6). In a similar vein, R. Yehoshua Bachrach suggests that Jonah wants to understand God's judgment, but is unable to fathom why bad things do not happen to bad people. Although these explanations are deeply rooted in the text, one must wonder why Jonah is the *only* prophet ever to flee his mission. Clearly, there must be something unique to Jonah beyond opposition to repentance or a lack of understanding of God's judgments which causes such an extreme reaction to God's command.

Jonah then boards the ship in Jaffa. A curious Midrash (*Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 10) expands the plot:

He [Jonah] went down to Jaffa and did not find a ship to board, but there was a ship which was at a two-day distance from Jaffa. What did God do? He brought a great gale on the ship and returned it to Jaffa. When Jonah saw this, he greatly rejoiced. He said: Now I know that my ways are justified to myself.

This Midrash highlights an intriguing, even unexpected trait of Jonah: he felt the need to defend his actions. This Midrash appears to pinpoint a deeper layer of Jonah's psyche. The prophet acts as he does despite a deeper, almost subconscious awareness that his flight from prophecy is wrong. Alternatively, the Midrash suggests that Jonah wants a sign of God's approval despite his rebellion against God's command. Thus, according to the Midrash, complex motivations and conflicting feelings underline the prophet's behavior.

Once on the ship, Jonah continues his idiosyncratic behavior. While the sailors and captain pray and work to save the ship, rowing furiously and throwing cargo overboard, Jonah escapes the crisis passively, by sleeping. Even more enigmatic, however, is Jonah's "dialogue" with the captain and the sailors in the text itself:

So the shipmaster came to him and said to him, why are you sleeping? Arise, call upon your God; perhaps God will think upon us that we perish not. And they said everyone to his fellow, come, and let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil (*ra'a*) is upon us. So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah. Then they said to him, please tell us for whose cause this evil is upon us; what is your occupation, and where do you come from? What is your country, and of what people are you (vv. 6-8)?

Trembling with fear, the captain directly addresses Jonah, asking that he pray, yet the prophet does not respond! As the sailors draw lots

to identify the source of their woes, Jonah watches passively, without saying a word about his own wrongdoing. Even after Jonah loses the lottery, he *still* remains silent. Only when confronted by the sailors does he respond, but his response is not to the point:

And he said to them: "I am a Hebrew (*ivri*); and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land" (v. 9).

To say the least, it is difficult to imagine that the panic-stricken sailors were interested in their peculiar guest's religious commitment. Adding to the mystery of Jonah's response, we find in v. 10 that the prophet *has* told the mariners about his fleeing God:

Then the men were exceedingly afraid, and they said to him, why have you done this? For the men knew that he had fled from the presence of the Lord, *because he had told them* (v. 10).

Why does the text not mention this critical information in verse 9 with the rest of the response? R. Yehoshua Bachrach suggests that the text omits Jonah's embarrassing response for the sake of the prophet's honor. This interpretation treats Jonah as worthy of respect, despite his disobedience. But it also highlights the self-deceptive element in Jonah's behavior: not only does the prophet cloud his own self-image, but the text does the same for him.

Let us further develop this interpretation. The Midrash in Gen. Rabba 42:13 explains that the term *ivri* (pertaining to Abraham) means that all the world stood on one side while Abraham courageously opposed them. Here, Jonah contrasts himself with everyone else on the ship: *you* worship your idols, but *I* fear the true God. The prophet's response also reveals that he believes his apprehension to be more complete than that of the sailors. While the sailors nervously refer to the storm as a *ra'a* (evil) in v. 8, Jonah calmly calls it a *se'ara* (storm—i.e., an objective term) in v. 12. He confidently states that he is the cause of this great tempest and displays remarkable poise as he suggests that they throw him overboard. Thus, it would appear that Jonah is belittling the sailors for their religious beliefs and their ignorance of the total picture. The text omits Jonah's mention of his flight from prophecy *because this information is irrelevant to the prophet himself*. Jonah does not fear as do the sailors; he sees himself on a higher plane of knowledge. And the text reflects this disdain in its omission of the most important element (from the sailors' point of view) of Jonah's response.

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How ironic it is that Jonah contrasts himself with the sailors: he is righteous and aware of God's plan; they are idolatrous and ignorant of God's ways. The careful reader also sees a contrast, but it is the antithesis of Jonah's own perception. The reader sees that the sailors act admirably, praying and acting to save themselves. They repent, becoming sincerely God-fearing people. Jonah, by contrast, does nothing, but actively avoids doing God's will.

Why doesn't Jonah repent at this point? Or, why doesn't he jump into the water himself? Although the Torah injunction against actively taking one's own life must weigh into this discussion, it would appear that other factors are involved. Throughout the first chapter, Jonah acts passively. He hardly responds to those addressing him, watching in silence as everyone else acts. Fleeing from God, Jonah avoids confrontation. Even as he wants to die, he cannot actively take his own life.

As Jonah is cast overboard to a seemingly imminent demise, the careful reader watches an extraordinarily passive person sink beneath the waves.

### II: JONAH AND THE LARGE FISH

God appoints a large fish to swallow Jonah. Jonah prays from inside the fish, apparently (although not necessarily) a gesture of repentance and submission. God then commands the fish to release Jonah onto dry land.

The most astonishing feature of chapter two occurs at its outset: Jonah waits three entire days inside the fish before praying! A fascinating Midrash<sup>11</sup> provides a detailed picture of what transpires inside the fish.

And his [the fish's] eyes were like windows . . . he [Jonah] said to [the fish] . . . show me all that is in the seas and the depths, and he showed him . . . And Jonah was inside the fish for three days and three nights and did not pray. God said: I gave him space inside a male fish so that he would not suffer, but he does not pray! I will bring a pregnant female fish . . . so that he will suffer and pray before me—since God craves the prayers of righteous people. . . . The male fish spewed Jonah out and the female fish swallowed him, and Jonah was in great agony from the pressure and the fetidness. Immediately, he turned his heart to prayer, as it is written, "And Jonah prayed . . . from inside the [female] fish (*ha-daga*)."

This Midrash highlights Jonah's passivity. God thinks, so to speak, that extended time in the fish's belly will convince Jonah to go to Nineveh. As long as he is not physically uncomfortable, however, the

prophet chooses to sightsee! It is noteworthy that even as this Midrash portrays Jonah in a negative light, it still emphasizes that Jonah is a righteous person. But Jonah does not concede defeat in his prayer:

For You did cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas; and the floods compassed me about: all Your billows and Your waves passed over me. Then I said: I am cast out of Your sight, I will look again towards Your Holy Temple. . . .

They that guard lying vanities forsake their loyalty. But I will pay that which I have vowed. Salvation belongs to the Lord (vv. 4-5, 9-10).

Jonah's "supplication" appears to lack any admission of sin or an explicit willingness to proceed with his Divine mission. More significantly, Jonah appears to place the onus for casting him away on God: *You* cast me into the deep; *Your* billows; *Your* waves. The prophet never accuses himself.

Some understand Jonah's acceptance of vows at the end of his prayer as referring to his new willingness to go to Nineveh.<sup>12</sup> This interpretation seems unsatisfactory, however, in light of the fact that Jonah needs to be told again to go to Nineveh (see 3:1-3, and our discussion of chapter three below). One would think that if Jonah really had repented, he would go directly to the "great city." A more plausible interpretation is that Jonah's remarks are an effort to distinguish himself from the sailors of chapter one, who also make vows (1:16). Since Jonah contrasts himself with the mariners in chapter one, it follows that here too he contrasts his own sincerity to that of the sailors. Jonah feels that his companions made vows out of fear of dying, rather than from legitimate religious motivations. Jonah, on the other hand, feels that his own vows in the fish are sincere.

But why should Jonah then need to be told again to go to Nineveh? And *are* his vows really sincere? Jonah's prayer displays no remorse, nor any desire to improve.

### III: JONAH AND NINEVEH

God again commands Jonah to go to Nineveh. Jonah goes and prophesies that in forty days, Nineveh will be overturned. The people listen to him, and the king calls for a city-wide repentance involving all people and animals. God sees the acts of repentance and rescinds His decree.

A closer look at God's command and Jonah's response reveals that

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more is going on than complete repentance on Jonah's part. Jonah does not proceed directly to Nineveh until he is ordered again. Additionally, the nature of God's command appears markedly different from that in chapter one:

Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it (*u-kerā aleha*); for their wickedness is come up before me (1:2).

Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it (*u-kerā eleha*) the message that I bid you (3:2).

In the first command, God does not specify the message for Jonah to transmit; God shows faith that Jonah will know what to say. In chapter three, on the other hand, God dictates a message to Jonah, thereby making it more difficult for him to deviate from his renewed assignment.

Moreover, chapter one uses the term *u-kerā aleha*, "cry against it." This phraseology implies a harsh tone, that Jonah is expected to prophesy the destruction of the city. In chapter three, however, God changes to *u-kerā eleha*, proclaim to it. This new command implies a more equal relationship between Jonah and the people of Nineveh. It would now appear that Jonah should tell the people of Nineveh to repent. But what does Jonah do?

So Jonah arose, and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord . . . And Jonah began to enter the city a day's journey, and he cried and said, Another forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown (vv. 3-4)!

Instead of urging the people to repent, Jonah announces their imminent doom, reverting to the original command of *u-kerā aleha*! Jonah does not want the people of Nineveh to repent; on the contrary, he prefers to witness their demise.<sup>13</sup> The people of Nineveh, however, frustrate Jonah's design. They embark on a repentance campaign, involving adults, children, and even animals. One might wonder whether people who alter their behavior so radically are sincerely motivated. The rabbis of the Midrash debate this point.<sup>14</sup>

If the people really act in earnest, it is understandable why God forgives them. But if the people of Nineveh are insincere, why does God grant His pardon? It is possible that for the people of Nineveh, who do not know the difference between right and wrong (4:11), even an insincere repentance is sufficient to save them from annihilation. Another possibility is that the Assyrians are part of a broader theological-historical picture, as they are destined to serve as God's messengers

to punish the Israelites for their wrongdoings (see Isa. 10:5). In any event, Jonah is inclined to focus on evidence that the people of Nineveh are hypocritical.<sup>15</sup>

Note the following two points: first, although Jonah is displeased at God's forgiving Nineveh despite what he considers insincere repentance, God had commanded the fish to release Jonah even though the prophet *himself* did not repent wholeheartedly. Additionally, in II Kings 14:23-27, Jonah prophesies a successful military campaign for Yarovam ben Yo'ash, even though there is no sign of repentance at that time whatsoever. Rather, God helps Israel because He pities them.

#### IV: JONAH AND GOD

Jonah, outraged at God's decision to spare Nineveh, asks to die. God challenges the prophet, who does not respond. Jonah camps outside Nineveh to see what will happen to the city. He builds a *sukka*, and God then grows a *kikayon* plant to offer shade to Jonah. Jonah rejoices at the *kikayon*, only to find it dead the next day. Jonah becomes faint from the heat and again asks God to kill him.

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was vexed. And he prayed to the Lord, and said, O Lord, was this not what I said when I was still in my own country? Therefore I fled beforehand to Tarshish: for I knew that You are a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and great in love, and repent of evil. Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live. Then the Lord said, are you so greatly vexed? (vv. 1-4).

Jonah regards the saving of Nineveh as a *ra'a gedola*, a great evil. Let us recall that in chapter one, while the terrified sailors refer to the great tempest as a *ra'a*, Jonah calmly refers to it as a storm, a *se'ara*; the prophet sees no need to evaluate it as terrible. Why does Jonah consider saving people such an evil, to the point where he actually requests to die? Some *peshat* commentaries maintain that Jonah wants to die either because he cannot endure the prospect that the Northern Kingdom of Israel will be destroyed by Assyria, or else that non-Jews have repented whereas Jews have not (see Ibn Ezra, Radak).

But if the prophet is motivated solely by such noble notions, why does God challenge him, almost in a sarcastic manner ("Are you so greatly vexed?")? Perhaps the following Midrash<sup>16</sup> can provide a deeper reason:

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He [Jonah] sent to Jerusalem [a prophecy] of destruction; when they repented, God had mercy and repented of the evil and did not destroy it, and they called him a false prophet. The third time [that Jonah was sent as a prophet] he was sent to Nineveh [to prophesy] its destruction. Jonah thought to himself: I know that the Gentiles are near repentance and they will repent . . . and not only will Israel call me a false prophet, but even idol-worshippers will call me a false prophet: I will flee to a place where God's glory is not there.

Jonah, to be sure, is concerned that the Assyrians will destroy Israel. But there is another reason behind his anger. The Israelites, and even non-Jews, would call him a false prophet! Is Jonah himself fully aware of the various motivations, some of them self-centered, coexisting in his soul?<sup>17</sup>

At this point, we reach the climax of the book. God teaches the prophet a powerful lesson through a plant. However, the lesson is enigmatic:

So Jonah went out of the city, and sat on the east side of the city, and there he made himself a shelter and sat under it in the shade, so that he might see what would come to pass in the city. And the Lord God appointed a castor oil plant, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to deliver him from his distress. And Jonah was exceedingly glad of the plant. But God appointed a worm when the dawn came up the next day, and it attacked the plant so that it withered. And it came to pass, when the sun arose, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat down on Jonah so that he fainted; so he asked that he might die, and he said, it is better for me to die than to live. And God said to Jonah, are you so greatly vexed on account of the plant? And he said, I am greatly vexed to death (vv. 5-9).

What is Jonah expecting to see? Why does he remain in such an uncomfortable place? He knows that God is not going to destroy the city. Perhaps Jonah is waiting for the city to revert to its evil ways (Bachrach, p. 61). Jonah is convinced that the people of Nineveh are insincere, and he waits for vindication. We hear echoes of the Midrash quoted in chapter one: now I see that my ways are justified to myself!

Just as God induced Jonah to pray from inside the fish, He now brings him to recognize his present attitude as overzealous. God causes a plant to sprout to give Jonah shade. Besides the simpler question of what happened to the *sukka* Jonah had built in the previous verse, we

must note a subtle reference. God sprouts the plant *le-hatsil lo mera'ato*, to save Jonah from his evil. Ostensibly, this *ra'a* is a reference to the heat which Jonah is trying unsuccessfully to endure. But is it not possible that this in fact is an allusion to Jonah's *ra'a gedola* back in verse one?

Jonah certainly is happy about the plant—*va-yismah Yona al ha-kikayon simha gedola*, although he does not express gratitude to God for it. According to Radak, the plant is particularly pleasant to the prophet because Jonah's *sukka* has dried up. But even assuming that he cannot reconstruct it, why doesn't Jonah simply return to Israel? Why does he remain in the blistering heat, even to the point of death? Jonah is so insistent on vindicating his point of view that he cannot or will not leave.

God prepares His case against Jonah through the medium of a plant.

Then the Lord said, you are concerned about the castor oil plant, for which you have not labored, and which you did not rear, which came up in a night and perished in a night; and should I not be concerned for Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand, and also much cattle (vv. 10-11)?

Curiously, God suggests that Jonah was concerned about the *kikayon*. It is evident, however, that the prophet was concerned about his own welfare, not that of the transient plant. As mentioned above, God is attempting to force the prophet to reconsider his self-evaluation. God therefore presents a *deliberately* self-deceptive analogy to the prophet. He tells Jonah that he had compassion on the plant, when in fact Jonah must have realized that he was pitying himself. Thus, God shows Jonah that he has painted too virtuous a picture of himself, enhancing the original challenge of, "Are so you greatly vexed?"

God completes His criticism by explaining that the people of Nineveh in fact have repented, albeit on a low level. It is not Jonah's job to speculate negatively about the motivations of over 120,000 people; he must focus on his own inner drives and inclinations.

Jonah, staring at the realization that he has been diverting attention from his own shortcomings by focusing on other people's flaws, reacts in character: he fails to respond. The story is left open, indicating that the struggle against passivity and self-deception is ongoing, without total resolution.

CONCLUSION: THE READING OF *JONAH* ON YOM KIPPUR

As we have seen, *Jonah* is a parable demonstrating that even the best people can have a powerful sense of self-deception. In addition to its more obvious messages, *Jonah* teaches that each person must take an active role in his or her life, trying to uncover the truth regarding one's motivation and promoting justice even where doing so is destructive to oneself or one's nation. A consequence of not doing so is that one will inevitably judge others uncharitably. One will neither achieve self-awareness nor obey God as faithfully as one should. Ultimately, to flee the very essence of one's being approaches spiritual suicide.

What better story could the Jewish people read at *Minha* of Yom Kippur than one which encourages them to live an active, honest religious life, with the courage to confront the greatest impediment to repentance: blindness to one's own flaws and secret injustices. Throughout the Yom Kippur liturgy, we bravely and honestly confess to God:

For we are not so brazen nor stubborn to say to You, Lord our God and God of our ancestors, we are righteous and have not sinned; but we have sinned, ourselves and our ancestors.

On Yom Kippur, we attempt to demonstrate to God that we are capable of being *Benei Amittai*, people of truth who are capable of repenting on the deepest human levels. *Jonah* contains the clear message that human beings can take an active role so as to become closer to others, to themselves, and ultimately, to God.

NOTES

1. See, for example, *Shabbat* 30b and *Megilla* 7a, which discuss rabbinic concern about the admission of several books to the biblical canon.
2. Mishna *Ta'anit* 2:1.
3. In this paper, we have used midrashic sources, the standard *Mikra'ot Gedolot* commentaries, Abarbanel, and *Da'at Mikra* (Mossad ha-Rav Kook, Jerusalem 1973, by Elyakim Ben-Menahem). This study was influenced by Rabbi Yehoshua Bachrach's *Yona Ben Amittai ve-Eliyyahu, Iyyun ba Sefer Yona al pi haMekorot*. Yeshivat Or Etzion, 1984.
4. We can understand the phrase *veYona yarad* in v. 5 to mean that Jonah had already gone down into the recesses of the ship (in contrast to *va-yered Yona*, which would have meant that he went down after the onset of the storm). See Rashi to Gen. 4:1, 21:1 for illustrations of this grammatical principle.

5. See *Mekhilta Petihta Bo*; *Kuzari* 2:4. Ibn Ezra explains that the phrase to flee *mi-lifnei HaShem* means to avoid prophecy, not to run away from God Himself.
6. In an amusing anecdote reported in *Mo'ed Katan* 25a, a student questions the principle that all prophecy occurs in Israel. He adduces proof from Ezekiel, who also sees great prophetic visions while in exile.
7. *Ex. Rabba* 4. For the reluctance of Moses, see *Ex. 3:1-4:17*; for Jeremiah, see *Jer. 1:4-10*.
8. It certainly is possible that Jonah does in fact respond to God; nevertheless, the text preserves that which is relevant to future generations. Therefore, Jonah's lack of response remains an issue to the religious reader of the Bible, even though the historical biographer of Jonah may voice objections.
9. Nineveh, in *Jonah*, is never explicitly situated in Assyria. It has its own king; Cf. *Gen. 10:12*, where Nineveh (also an "*ir gedola*") could easily be a separate city-state. If this is the case, then the other reasons for Jonah's fleeing become even more prominent.
10. See *Sanhedrin* 89a.
11. *Yalkut Shim'oni* 550. Much of this passage is found in *Tanhuma Vayikra* 8 and *Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer* 9. See also *Otzar haMidrashim* (Eisenstein), p. 217.
12. See *Tanhuma Vayikra* 8; Abarbanel.
13. My sister Ronda Angel suggests an alternative explanation of the change from *u-kerā eleha* to *u-kerā aleha*: By commanding Jonah to call to Nineveh's populace as equals, God is subtly equating Jonah's guilt with that of the people he is going to chastise. God's new commandment, therefore, is not simply a reminder of the prophet's mission; it is a direct critique of Jonah.

Jonah reverts to the original commandment of *u-kerā aleha*, in part because people are more likely to listen to the exhortations of a superior (rather than a peer), but also so that he can once again put himself above those he criticizes. It is therefore partially a quest for self-justification that motivates the prophet.
14. *Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer* 42 states that after forty days, the people of Nineveh reverted to their evil ways. In *Otzar haMidrashim* (Eisenstein, p. 217), we find that the people of Nineveh threaten God, saying that if He tries to kill them, they will kill their animals and children. In J. T. *Ta'anit* 65b, there is an argument as to whether the people actually returned everything they had stolen, or only those objects which were in the open.
15. See also E. E. Urbach, "The Repentance of Nineveh and Jewish-Christian Polemic" (*Tarbits* 20, 118-122).
16. See *Tanhuma Vayikra* 8; *Otzar haMidrashim* (Eisenstein), p. 217.
17. Let us emphasize that this critique in no way challenges Jonah's status as a *tsaddik gamur*. Righteousness in Judaism is defined primarily by one's actions. Jonah's running away in fact served a greater cause, for the benefit of Israel. Moreover, Jonah surely was motivated by the purest of motives as well. Nevertheless, some of his implicit motivations (according to this Midrash) were not as justifiable as Jonah consciously thought.