

Let My Nation Be Warned

*The story of Yonah,
a reluctant prophet
on a mission of
repentance*

*A compilation
of Talmudic
and Midrashic
sources*

Including a Hebrew-English Book of Yonah

Y O S E F D E U T S C H

FELDHEIM  PUBLISHERS

Also by the author:

Let My Nation Go (Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 1998)

Let My Nation Live (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 2002)

Let My Nation Serve Me (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 2004)

Let My Nation Descend (Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 2008)

Let My Nation Wander (Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 2012)

Let My Nation Ascend (Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 2012)

Let Me Join Your Nation (Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 2013)

Series design: DC Design

Cover illustration: Deb Hoeffner

Page layout: E. Chachamtzedek

Copyright © 2014 by Yosef Deutsch

ISBN 978-1-59826-115-8

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be translated,
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or
transmitted, in any form or by any means,
electronic or otherwise, even for personal use,
without written permission from the publisher.

FELDHEIM PUBLISHERS

POB 43163/ Jerusalem, Israel

208 Airport Executive Park

Nanuet, NY 10954

www.feldheim.com

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in Israel



A Disturbing Prophecy

The roads were clogged with many thousands of people making their pilgrimage to the holy city of Yerushalayim for the Sukkos festival in order to fulfill the mitzvah of *aliyah leregel*. They came from every corner of Eretz Yisrael: young and old, men and women, children and infants. While some pilgrims rode on animals or in carts, most were on foot. They endured the hardships of the journey with joy in their hearts, and as they walked, many of them sang praises to the glory of Hashem, into Whose presence they were approaching.

An old man with a full, white beard walked at a steady pace among the throngs. Although he was about one hundred years old, he handled his walking stick with dexterity and strode with the vigor of a younger man. His face shone with a holy glow and his eyes bespoke a profound kindness and compassion. His name was Yonah ben Amitai, and he was a prophet of Hashem. His footsteps quickened with anticipation as he thought about reaching transcendent levels of joy at the nightly *Simchas Beis Hasho'evah* celebrations. His heart was filled with happiness.

As the prophet entered the gates of the city he was immediately swept up in the spirit of exhilaration that crackled through the crowded streets and alleys. Off to the side a man was playing a flute, moving his feet in a slow dance as he played. On a street corner a juggler was performing antics, entertaining the children of the arrivals. The squeals of childish laughter delighted Yonah; he shared their pure and innocent joy.

In this state of extreme joy the spirit of prophecy came upon him and he suddenly heard the voice of Hashem.¹ “Yonah, go quickly to Nineveh.”²

A Prophecy for Yonah

Nineveh! Why would Hashem want Yonah to go to the capital city of the distant kingdom of Ashur?³ Nineveh was a huge metropolis, incorporated from three sizable cities⁴ and covering over one hundred square miles⁵ — but there were no Jews. Well, maybe there were one or two traders but there was certainly no Jewish community. What would a Jewish prophet be doing in Nineveh?

“Nineveh, as in the capital Ashur?” said Yonah.

“Yes. Go there immediately.”

1. *Yerushalmi Sukkah* 5:1; *Mishbetzos Zahav*, Yonah 1:1.

During the festival of Sukkos sacrifices are brought representing the nations of the world, as an atonement for them so that Hashem should bring rain to the world. It makes sense, therefore, that at this time Hashem would charge Yonah to warn the city of Nineveh of their imminent destruction. See *Sukkah* 55b with Rashi; and Rashi, *Bamidbar* 29:18.

2. Despite the use of the harsh word, “*devar*,” in the verse (*Yonah* 1:1), the divine name used is *Hashem*, which represents the Divine Attribute of Mercy, rather than *Elokim*, which represents the Divine Attribute of Justice. Hashem, in His compassion, gave Nineveh a chance to repent in order to avoid being destroyed (*Otzar Midrashim*, *Yonah*).

3. Ibn Ezra, *Yonah* 1:2; Mahari Kra.

4. *Chizkuni*, *Ha'amek Davar* on *Bereishis* 10:12.

5. *Otzar Midrashim*. See also *Mishbetzos Zahav*. According to *Pesachim* 93b, it would be eighty-seven miles, if a *parsah* is measured at 2.9 miles.

“What should I do there?”

“The people of Nineveh have sunk deeply into sin. They have reached an appalling level of idolatry,⁶ thievery⁷ and depravity.⁸ Your mission is to deliver a prophetic message from Me to them. They must immediately repent and change their ways or suffer the consequences.”⁹

Yonah was puzzled. “But I am a Jewish prophet! I am a messenger to the Jewish people.¹⁰ Why am I carrying messages to people with whom I have no connection? How does the sinfulness of Nineveh affect my prophetic mission?”

“Your mission to Nineveh, Yonah, will indeed have a direct effect on the Jewish people here in Eretz Yisrael. If you succeed and the people of Nineveh turn away from their sinful ways, the Jews will learn from their example. They have turned a deaf ear to the numerous Jewish prophets who have rebuked and guided them over the years. But when they see the people of a great metropolis such as Nineveh humble themselves and accept My message, perhaps they will repent as well. That is your mission as a Jewish prophet.”¹¹

“I understand,” said Yonah, “but why is such an unusual, divine scrutiny being directed at Nineveh? Generally non-Jews are not taken to task for licentiousness and moral laxity.”¹²

6. Abarbanel, Malbim on *Yonah* 3:10. *Mishbetzos Zahav* adds that they were also guilty of speaking *lashon hara*.

7. Radak, *Yonah* 1:2. See *Yonah* 3:8.

8. *Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer* 43 with Radal, note 62.

9. Mahari Kra, *Yonah* 1:2, offers the view that Nineveh’s sin was for its part in the exile of the ten tribes. Abarbanel writes just the opposite. He says that Hashem held off from destroying the city of Nineveh because He wanted them to complete the exile of the ten tribes due to the latter’s sins.

10. See *Devarim* 18:14-15.

11. See Alshich, *Yonah* 1:2. Despite this, Yonah remains the only prophet whose primary prophecy was directed to non-Jews (*Bava Basra* 15b).

12. Malbim, *Yonah*, *ibid*.

“That is true,” said Hashem, “but the depravity of the people of Nineveh has reached intolerable levels. Such widespread theft and larceny have not been seen since the generation of the Flood. And you know that robbery seals the fate of nations. The sins are so egregious that they cannot be ignored.¹³ Moreover, the people who suffer at the hands of the sinners are crying out to Me in desperation. Many centuries ago the cries of the victims in the city of Sedom reached the high heavens and drew My attention. The same is happening now in Nineveh.”¹⁴

“But if Nineveh is comparable to Sedom, why are its people being given the opportunity to repent? After all, the people of Sedom were given no such opportunity before it was destroyed.”

“There are a number of reasons. When King Nimrod challenged My authority during *Dor Haflagah*, the generation of the dispersion, a man named Ashur parted company with him and went off into the wilderness, where he founded the city of Nineveh. In his merit, the city deserves to be warned.¹⁵ Furthermore, the nation of Ashur is destined to carry off the ten tribes into captivity. I could not allow a degenerate nation steeped in the deepest sinfulness to drive My children into exile. It would not be acceptable.”¹⁶

13. Rabbi Avraham Nasi, *Binah la'Itim*, *Shabbos Shuvah* 2. See *Vayikra Rabbah* 33:3.

14. See Radak, *Yonah* 1:2, *Amos* 1:3; *Beis Elokim*, *teshuvah* 13. *Mishbetzos Zahav* says that the people were crying out over being victims of *lashon hara* and their pain is what sealed the decree against the city. See also Alshich, *Metzudas David*, Malbim on *Yonah*, *ibid.*, who say that their sins themselves rise and demand retribution for the severity of their creation. When this happens, Hashem cannot ignore their claim.

15. See *Midrash Aggadah*, *Chizkuni*, Rashi on *Bereishis* 10:11–12; *Bereishis Rabbah* 37:6; *Bereishis Rabbasi* 31. See Rashi, *Tehillim* 83:9, *Yechezkel* 31:4. In fact, Nineveh was built as a substitute for the tower that Nimrod sought to build (*Midrash Yelamdeinu*). Although they never abandoned idol worship, the people of Nineveh did repent from theft and from sins relating to *bein adam lechaveiro*. For Nineveh, that was enough for Hashem to forgive them (Abarbanel, Malbim on *Yonah* 3:10).

16. Abarbanel, Malbim, *Metzudas David* on *Yonah* 1:2. See *Chavakuk* 1:3.

Yonah's Concerns

The spirit of prophecy left Yonah, and he emerged from his trance. The prophetic mission he was charged with had disturbed him deeply. If he fulfilled his mission and warned the people of Nineveh to repent, and if they indeed repented, the Jewish people would be in mortal danger.¹⁷ Of course, if the people of Nineveh repented and Jews followed their example all would be well. But what if they didn't? They had turned a deaf ear to so many prophets. Would the example of Nineveh have a stronger effect on them than the hundreds of years of warnings from the prophets? If they did not repent now they would most likely bring down divine retribution down upon their heads.¹⁸

What's more, Hashem had just told Yonah that the people of Nineveh needed to repent in order to be deemed worthy of driving the ten tribes into exile! So wouldn't it be better if they did not repent? Then the Jewish people would be able to remain in their own land.¹⁹

Yonah faced a difficult dilemma. What was he to do? How could he disobey Hashem? But how could he put his beloved people in such grave danger? Should he take the risk and travel to Nineveh?

He turned the problem over and over in his head. Was there really a risk that the people of Nineveh would repent? After all, why would they pay attention to a prophet who lived almost a thousand miles away? They were idol-worshiping pagans; they'd probably laugh at a Jewish prophet coming to rebuke

17. Abarbanel, Malbim on *Yonah*, *ibid*.

18. See *II Melachim* 17:13; *Yirmeyahu* 7:25. This is what is meant in *Mishlei* 14:34, that the kindness offered to the nations of the world brings calamities upon the Jews, for Nineveh's repentance became an accusation against them (*Shir haShirim Zuta* 1:15).

19. Abarbanel, Malbim on *Yonah* 1:2.

them. They might even kill him. And if indeed they didn't repent, then the Jewish people would be safe. So maybe he should just take the chance and warn them, hoping that they would ignore him.

Yonah shook his head. This was all just wishful thinking. The truth was that the pagans were more likely to repent than the Jewish people,²⁰ because they were simply not as stubborn as the Jewish people.²¹ And for the pagans, the decision to repent would not have the same profound implications that it would have for the Jewish people, who would seek to eradicate the stain of sin and return to Hashem out of inspiration and love, a long and difficult process. Repenting was much easier for the non-Jews. Simple fear of punishment would motivate them, and all they had to do was desist from their transgressions. There would be no arduous process of cleansing their souls and drawing closer to Hashem.²² No, it was wrong to think that the people of Nineveh would ignore him. There was a good chance they would repent in their own way, and, Hashem being so merciful and gracious, it would probably be enough to tip the scales in their favor.²³

Another thought struck Yonah. The king of Nineveh at this time was none other than the pharaoh of the Exodus, whose intransigence had brought down the plagues on his country. He had been cast into the sea along with his army, but while floundering in the sea he had a moment of sincere repentance and miraculously survived. He made his way to Ashur, where he became the king of Nineveh.²⁴ Pharaoh had witnessed the devastation

20. Radak, *ibid.*, 1:3.

21. *Netzach Yisrael* 14.

22. Rav Tzadok haKohen, *Pri Tzadik, Vayeilech* 17 and *Dover Tzedek, Achrei Mos* 4; *Chasam Sofer, Tehillim* 147:16; *Kochvei Ohr*. See Radal, note 7, on *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* 10.

23. Mahari Kra, *Yonah* 1:3.

24. *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* 43; *Lekach Tov, Shemos* 14:28; Tur, *Shemos* 14:31. See

wrought by the hand of Hashem, and the prophetic warning would strike fear deep in his heart and inspire him to repent.²⁵ And the people would probably follow his example.²⁶

All the joy Yonah had felt upon entering the holy city of Yerushalayim dissipated as he pondered his options. What choices did he have? If he suppressed his prophecy and failed to warn the people of Nineveh he would be committing a sin and risking an untimely death. But this was the least of his problems. He could not be concerned about his own safety when his beloved Jewish people were facing mortal danger.²⁷

As the thought of avoiding the delivery of his prophecy to Nineveh took root in his mind, Yonah began to rationalize. Was there any justification for the path he was contemplating? Could he, a prophet of Hashem, even consider suppressing his prophecy?

Well, if he did it for the sake of Hashem's honor it might be acceptable. And even if it could be considered prophecy, it was certainly an incomplete prophecy, because Hashem had not yet revealed the consequences to him. When he had prophesied to the Jewish people that Yerushalayim would be destroyed if the Jews didn't repent, the results had been mixed. Many people had

Yosef Deutsch, *Let My Nation Go* (Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 1998), page 375. One of the reasons Hashem forbade Jews to detest Egyptians was because of Pharaoh's repentance. See *Sifsei Kohen, Devarim 23:8*.

According to another view, the king was a man named Esnapar. He would eventually take the name Sancheriv and build an empire that would rule the world before falling to Nevuchadnetzar and the Babylonians (*Yalkut Shimoni, Yonah 550; Ezra 4:10; Aggadas Bereishis 2*).

25. See Ibn Ezra, *ibid.*, 1:2.

26. See *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* 10 with Radal, note 7, and 43 with Radal, note 59; *Me'am Lo'ez, Yonah, ibid.*

27. Malbim, *ibid.* See *Sanhedrin* 89a. Yonah modeled himself after Avraham, who stood fast to defend Sedom so that it wouldn't be destroyed. For this he received merit — how much more so if one defends Hashem's own nation (Alshich, *Yonah* 1:3).

indeed repented, but the rebellious rabble had not. Moreover, they accused him of being a false prophet when Yerushalayim was not destroyed. What if the nations of the world would accuse him of being a false prophet if Nineveh were not destroyed?²⁸ Wouldn't that be a terrible desecration of Hashem's name?²⁹

Still, could such a concern justify the suppression of a prophecy — a very grave sin indeed? But wait! Had he actually received a prophecy? Not really. Hashem had told him to go to Nineveh and rebuke the people for their sinfulness. Was that a prophecy or just a message of rebuke?³⁰ After all, Hashem had not yet told him what would happen if the people of Nineveh did not repent. If the warning had contained a prediction of what would happen, that would surely be considered a complete prophecy. But as it was, it could only be considered an incomplete prophecy.

If the prophecy were incomplete, however, it was only a matter of time before Hashem informed him of the consequences that would result should the people of Nineveh refuse to repent. At that point, the prophecy would be complete, and Yonah would be put in the untenable position of having to suppress it in order to protect the Jewish people.

28. Rashi, *Yonah* 4:1; *Tanchuma*, *Vayikra* 8. In light of the weak nature of the people of Nineveh's repentance and the nation's continued survival, this would only reinforce for the scoffers that he was in fact a false prophet (*Sukkas David*, *Yom Kippur* 3).

29. Ibn Ezra, *Yonah* 1:2; *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* 10 with Radal, note 10. *Peirush Velo Od* on *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* comments that Yonah refused to go to Nineveh because he worried the Jews would lose faith in the authenticity of their prophets. See Rabbeinu Eliezer Beaugency, *Yonah* 1:2, for his view regarding why Yonah ran away.

30. Malbim, *ibid.* Introduction of *Mishbetzos Zahav*. See *Sefer Chasidim* 1124. For more on the subject of concealing a prophecy, see *Minchas Chinuch*, mitzvah 516:4, and *Lechem Mishneh*, *Yesodei HaTorah* 8:2. *Chomas Onach* holds that avoiding a prophecy directed to the nations of the world doesn't fall into the category of concealing a prophecy.

Escaping Eretz Yisrael

Suddenly, Yonah had an idea. Hashem did not speak to His prophets outside of Eretz Yisrael!³¹ If he would flee Eretz Yisrael right away,³² before Hashem informed him of the consequences the people of Nineveh would suffer should they persist in their sinfulness, the prophecy would remain incomplete and he would not be guilty of suppressing it.³³

There was no time to waste. He had to leave Eretz Yisrael as soon as possible.³⁴ Yonah quickly left Yerushalayim, but he was still not sure of his destination. Would it be enough to just cross the border into a neighboring land? And was it absolutely

31. See *Mechilta*, Bo 4; Zohar, *Bereishis* 85a; Radak, *Yonah* 1:3. Abarbanel, in his introduction to the book of *Amos*, says that the source of the prophetic spirit comes from the Aron inside the Beis haMikdash. While one is in its proximity he is capable of receiving a prophecy. See *Meshech Chochmah*, *Vayikra* 16:1.

There are opposing opinions regarding this; see *Targum Yonasan*, Rashi, on *Yechezkel* 1:3. Radvaz (2:842) writes that only initial prophecies aren't given outside Eretz Yisrael, but subsequent ones are. Here the question is whether Yonah in fact received a full-fledged prophecy in the first place. See *Moed Katan* 25a.

32. See Rabbeinu Bachya, *Bamidbar* 24:11, for his translation of the word *barach*, "flee," and how it is applied to this incident with Yonah. See *Targum Yonasan*, *Yonah* 1:3; Rav Saadiah Gaon, *Emunos veDe'os* 3.

Seforno, *Yonah* 1:2, defines the difference between fleeing and escaping. Yonah sought to flee Hashem, not to escape. See *Sichos Musar* 94, which points out that by leaving his responsibilities, Yonah had in essence lowered himself to a status that no longer identified him as a prophet. As a result, he wasn't concealing a prophecy he was no longer capable of receiving. See Alshich, *Yonah* 1:3.

33. *Mechilta*, Bo; Alshich, Malbim on *Yonah* 1:1–2; Rabbeinu Bachya, *Bereishis* 2:7. In fact, one opinion holds that Hashem purposely held back parts of the prophecy because He knew Yonah would run; since he received only part of the prophecy, Yonah would be innocent of the crime of suppressing a prophecy and only guilty for running away. This small detail would preserve his life (Alshich, *Yonah* 1:2. See Radvaz 2:842). Radvaz, *ibid.*, says that Yonah hadn't yet actually gotten his prophecy. A prophetic spirit rested on him which alerted him that he was due to receive a prophecy from Hashem, and it is from this spirit that he ran.

34. *Yerushalmi Sanhedrin* 11:5; *Mechilta*, Bo; *Tanchuma*, *Vayikra* 8; Rashi, *Yonah* 1:3; *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* 10 with Radal, note 20.

guaranteed that he would receive no prophecy on the other side of the border? After all, Hashem had once spoken to Eliyahu in the Sinai desert.³⁵ Could he really expect to hide from Hashem, Whose glory fills the heavens and the earth?³⁶

The only solution, Yonah reasoned, was to head for the open seas, where Hashem's glory is not mentioned in the Torah.³⁷ Hashem would be present there too, of course, but perhaps the sea was not a place conducive to prophecy. Furthermore, the danger of a sea voyage would preoccupy his mind with worry and anxiety, and he would not be in the joyous and serene state of mind necessary for receiving prophecy.³⁸ Moreover, on a sea voyage he would be in the company of gentile sailors steeped in corruption and defilement, and surely Hashem would not speak to him in such a place, just as He did not speak to Avraham until he parted ways with Lot. Yes, a sea voyage was his best plan of action.³⁹

As Yonah headed toward the Mediterranean seaport of Yaffo he still felt pangs of guilt about his planned disobedience, but he was willing to risk punishment for the sake of his nation. It would

35. Malbim, *Yonah* 1:3.

36. *Tehillim* 139:7; *Tanchuma*, *Vayikra* 8; *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* 10 with Radal, note 12. See *Yeshayahu* 6:3; *Tehillim* 113:4.

37. See *Tanchuma*, *Vayikra* 8; *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* 10 with Radal, note 12. While Hashem's presence is everywhere, since the sea is a place of judgment Hashem doesn't reveal Himself in prophecy. By contrast, the Divine Attribute of Mercy resides in rivers and other pools of water, wherein Hashem does reveal Himself (*Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* 9 with Radal, note 19). See *Yeshayahu* 6:3; *Tehillim* 113:4. See *Midrash Talpiot*, *Yonah*, for an additional reason.

38. Malbim, *Yonah* 1:3. See *Mishbetzos Zahav*, which points out that unlike in Eretz Yisrael, outside Eretz Yisrael a person needs to prepare himself for prophecy. Thus, Yonah's preoccupation with being seabound would prevent him from receiving prophecy. See *Meshech Chochmah*, *Vayikra* 16:1, and *Me'am Lo'ez*, *Yonah* 1:2. For additional reasons why Yonah sought safe haven at sea, see *Tiferes haChanochi*.

39. Malbim, *Yonah* 1:3. This too applied to Yaakov while he was in the presence of Lavan (Rashi, *Bereishis* 31:3).

be a small price to pay for the survival of so many Jewish people and all the mitzvos they would be able to perform for the rest of their lives.⁴⁰ He recalled that Moshe, the greatest prophet who ever lived, had balked for seven days when Hashem told him to go to Pharaoh, because he felt inadequate for such a mission. Surely it was incumbent upon him to balk too.⁴¹

In essence, Yonah decided to choose the son over the father, seeking to protect the Jewish people over the wishes of Hashem.⁴²

It was a serious mistake.

40. *Mechilta, Bo*. Here too, Yonah sought to compare himself with Moshe, in that Moshe was willing to die for the sake of the Jewish people. See *Shemos* 32:32; *Bamidbar* 11:15. David too was willing to do the same; see *II Shemuel* 24:17. Rav Chaim Kanievsky, in *Ta'ama d'Kra*, says that Yonah believed he was being tested to see if in fact he was willing to give his life for the sake of the Jewish people. See *Sichos Musar* 94, which states that Yonah believed that on the contrary, Hashem desired a prophet who was willing to give up his entire spiritual status for the sake of the Jewish people.

41. Ibn Ezra, Alshich, *Yonah* 1:1. According to *Kad haKemach*, Yonah reasoned as follows: if Moshe refused to save a righteous people, I certainly should refuse to save an evil people. Unlike Moshe, who sought to have someone else replace him, Yonah did not want anyone to replace him because he didn't want anyone going to Nineveh. Moshe had no problem with the message but rather with who should give the message; Yonah's problem was with the message itself (*Radvaz* 2:842). See Rabbeinu Eliezer Beaugency, *Yonah* 1:3.

Just as Moshe was punished as a result of his obstinacy, Yonah too was willing to accept punishment for his refusal to be Hashem's emissary (*Markevot haMishnah*).

42. *Mechilta, Bo*; Alshich, *Yonah* 1:1; Rabbeinu Bachya, *Bamidbar* 24:11.