

YOM KIPPUR

Jonah's Dilemma

The sun is already beginning to set in the western sky. As the precious final minutes of the holiest day of the year slip away, we reach one of its celebrated high points - the *haftarah* reading which relates the story of Jonah and the whale.

This famous yet thoroughly baffling story opens with Hashem sending Jonah as a divine messenger to the huge Assyrian metropolis of Ninveh. The city had descended to a level of decadence that was simply intolerable, and destruction was imminent. Only immediate repentance would bring about a reprieve. Jonah, however, does not want to undertake this mission, and he attempts to flee from Hashem. He books passage on a ship which will carry him far away from Ninveh, but a sudden storm threatens to tear the ship apart. The sailors cast lots, and Jonah is tossed into the sea, where he is swallowed by a whale.

From the belly of the whale, Jonah cries out to Hashem in anguish and despair and pleads for deliverance. Hashem answers Jonah's prayer. The whale spits him out onto the shore, and he sets off at once for Ninveh, where his message is greeted with consternation. The people don sackcloth and repent, and the city is spared.

The obvious question leaps at us from the page: Jonah was undoubtedly a very holy man if Hashem granted him the gift of prophecy. How then did he have the effrontery to refuse to serve as the messenger of Heaven?

Our Sages tell us that Jonah was concerned for the welfare of the Jewish people who, at that time, were also guilty of grievous sins in spite of the repeated warnings of the great prophets. They explain Jonah feared the people of evil Ninveh, a nation of degenerate pagans, would heed his prophetic warning and repent, causing the Jewish people, the custodians of the Torah, to suffer by comparison. They would stand indicted before the bar of Heavenly justice with nothing to say in their own defense. Therefore, Jonah chose to flee rather than bring down retribution on the heads of his people.

But the questions still remain: Did Jonah think he could frustrate the divine plan by fleeing on a ship? Did he think Hashem would find no other way to offer Ninveh the option of repentance? And even if he thought his flight could somehow benefit the Jewish people, what right did he have to suppress the prophecy entrusted to him?

Furthermore, what lesson are we meant to derive from this story in the climactic moments of Yom Kippur? Is it only meant to present us with another example of disaster avoided through timely repentance? Or is there also a deeper significance in the central theme of the story, which revolves around Jonah's attempt to extricate himself from his mission?

The commentators explain that Jonah certainly had no illusions about thwarting the divine plan. If Hashem wanted to warn Ninveh that only repentance could save them, He undoubtedly would. However, Jonah had such an overpowering love for the Jewish people that he could not bear to be the agent of their misfortune. In desperation, he resolved to flee so that Hashem's will would be fulfilled through some other channel. He was fully aware of the magnitude of his act and the dire consequences he would probably suffer for his disobedience, but the alternative was unbearable.

Hashem, however, chose not to send a different messenger to Ninveh. Instead, He sent storms and whales to force Jonah to return and accept his mission. The message to Jonah was very clear, and it resonates down through the ages to reach us every Yom Kippur. Jonah had no right to weigh the pros and cons of obeying Hashem's command. He did not have the option of deciding whether or not to obey. If Hashem commanded him to go to Ninveh, then that was what he was obliged to do, and no amount of rationalization could change it. A person has to subjugate himself completely to the divine will, to obey without question, reservation or rationalization. Hashem undoubtedly knew of Jonah's love for his people, and if He nevertheless sent him on his mission, Jonah had no choice but to obey.

In our own lives, we sometimes bend the rules to suit our convenience. We fall into the trap of "situation ethics," seeking a middle ground between our desires and the dictates of our Creator. We rationalize. We equivocate. We compromise. Like Jonah, we seek to escape the strictures imposed on us by our innermost conscience. But in actuality, as Jonah discovered so painfully, it is not for us to make value judgments about the divine will. Total acceptance may indeed be difficult from time to time, but overall, it is the only path to spiritual tranquillity and fulfillment.