



# MISHNAS CHAYIM

# משנת חיים

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת האזינו תש"ע א Parshas Haazinu 5770

## YONAH: A LIFE'S JOURNEY

One of the high points of Yom Kippur is the *haftarah* recited during *minchah*: the cherished Sefer Yonah. The compelling narrative is familiar to most. Charged with a mission to prophesy to the people of Nineveh and exhort them to *teshuvah* (repentance), Yonah attempts to flee instead. After boarding a vessel on its way to Tarshish, Yonah and his traveling companions find themselves in great peril, as Hashem summons a turbulent storm. At Yonah's behest, the sailors cast him into the waters, and the storm subsides. Yonah is swallowed by a great fish, and he beseeches the Almighty from within its cavernous bowels. The fish then deposits Yonah on dry land, and he submits to his mission. The people of Nineveh hear his call, and they mend their wicked ways.

The connection to Yom Kippur seems obvious enough. As the culmination of the Ten Days of Repentance, and a day of atonement and purification, Yom Kippur is the quintessential opportunity for *teshuvah* – a major theme of this episode. Indeed, this is a central focus of the day (*Mishnah B'rurah* 622:7).

### THE MISSION

In the *Sha'ar Hatziyun* (*ibid* 6), the Chofetz Chaim elaborates on this idea, presenting a more specific variation of the *teshuvah* theme. The story of Yonah delivers a clear message: *Don't give up*. As Yom Kippur is a time of self-reflection, a person may become unnecessarily discouraged. Contemplating his deeds and personal standing, and reflecting on his struggles, one could feel that he is beyond hope. All good intentions of the past

have met with failure; change has proven too difficult. He may conclude – erroneously – that overcoming his faults and improving his behavior is unrealistic. Resigned to his “fate” he may decide that, “This is the way I will always be,” and simply await the inevitable time when he will have to suffer the consequences.

The Prophet Yonah comes to counteract this notion. “Nothing doing!” the *navi* announces. The entire storyline illustrates the futility – and impossibility – of evading one's responsibility. For whatever the well-intentioned calculations that Yonah made (discussed in length by the commentaries), he felt that he should and could abandon his mission. His ship was almost torn asunder, he practically drowned at sea, and he was swallowed by a huge sea-creature. At that point, did it appear that the intended message would be delivered by Yonah to Nineveh? Would anyone have thought then that Hashem's Will would be fulfilled? Yet, not too long after, there was Yonah – standing at the gates of the city, persuading the masses to repent.

The great lesson of this story – as it relates to our personal lives and our self-contemplation on this sublime day – is reflected in the Mishnah in Avos (4:22):

וְאֵל יִבְטִיחַךְ וְיָצִיחַךְ שֶׁהַשְּׂאוּל בֵּית מְנוּס לָךְ, שְׁעַל  
כְּרַחֲךְ אֶתָּה נּוֹצֵר, וְעַל כְּרַחֲךְ אֶתָּה חַי, וְעַל כְּרַחֲךְ  
אֶתָּה מֵת, וְעַל כְּרַחֲךְ אֶתָּה עֵתִיד לָתֵן דִּין וְחֶשְׁבוֹן  
לְפָנַי מְלַךְ מַלְכֵי הַמַּלְכִּים הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא.

“Let not your heart convince you that the grave is a place of refuge for you; for a person is formed against his will, and enters life against his will, and (eventually) dies against his will, and in the future must stand in judgment against his will – before the King of Kings, the Holy One, Blessed is He.”

Dedicated in loving memory of

ישראל צבי בן חיים יהושע פאלק ע"ה

by his children, Marc and Debbi Frankel, Bala Cynwyd, PA

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of אברהם דוד בן בנימין ע"ה, a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his neshamah.

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### **BACK AGAIN**

This, concludes the Chofetz Chaim, is one of the great truths of life, and is particularly pertinent to someone on the verge of relinquishing his efforts. The stark reality is that there is no such thing as avoiding the fight! A person has been sent to this world with a mission – to mend the blemishes of his soul, by improving his ways. To this end, a Jew is charged with the holy task of expending his energies pursuing Torah, *teshuvah*, and good deeds; only in this manner will his soul reach the mandated level of perfection. It may take a lifetime of hard work, but the goal is definitely attainable.

Aborting the mission is simply not an option. Hashem's Will is for the individual to perfect his soul. If this is not accomplished during one's lifetime, he will simply be sent back. "The netherworld is not a place of refuge." *Until he has completed his mission of self-improvement, a*

person may be forced to return to this world multiple times.

(Our Sages have made it quite clear that this option – known in rabbinic literature as *gilgul neshamos* [reincarnation] – is a truly undesirable experience, to be avoided at all costs. The Chayei Adam [5:1] relates a story in which a particular *tzaddik* [righteous individual] stood in judgment before the Heavenly Court after his passing. Although he was found to be quite meritorious, there was one area in which his Divine service was lacking. Specifically, he had violated the severe transgression of pronouncing the Name of Hashem in vain on numerous occasions. Before continuing on to his eternal and abundant reward, these failures had to be rectified. The *tzaddik* was given a choice: to temporarily return to earth [in the form of a *gilgul*] to make amends there or to descend for a period of time to Gehinom. He chose Gehinom over being reborn.)

The extent to which this theme is interwoven into the fabric of Sefer Yonah is truly noteworthy. In addition to the factual, true account of Yonah's mission, the Vilna Gaon (throughout his commentary to Sefer Yonah) perceives an allegorical interpretation within the text. Yonah is the *neshamah*, which is charged with a mission to fulfill in this world: perfecting the soul. The *neshamah* boards a "vessel" to journey through this world: namely, the body. But the person tries to flee from Hashem and avoid fulfilling His charge. Eventually, the individual is "swallowed up" and departs from this world, leaving his task unfinished. What happens after that? "And the Word of Hashem came to Yonah a *second time*, saying: 'Arise! Go to Nineveh...' " (*Yonah 3:1-2*). The *neshamah* is sent back to earth, to finally accomplish its intended mission.

Before this holy day draws to a close, Sefer Yonah reminds us of this timely lesson. The blemishes of the soul will inevitably be addressed; the time to get started is now.

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