

---

# Thoughts on the Book of Jonah

Rabbi Gur Berman

Faculty, Hillel Day School, Boca Raton, FL

There is a difficult story recorded in 1 Kings Chapter 17 Verse 17-24:

And it came to pass after these things, that the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, fell sick; and his sickness was so sore, that there was no breath left in him. And she said unto Elijah: 'What have I to do with thee, O thou man of God? art thou come unto me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to slay my son?' And he said unto her: 'Give me thy son.' And he took him out of her bosom, and carried him up into the upper chamber, where he abode, and laid him upon his own bed. And he cried unto the LORD, and said: 'O LORD my God, hast Thou also brought evil upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by slaying her son?' And he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried unto the LORD, and said: 'O LORD my God, I pray thee, let this child's soul come back into him. 'And the LORD hearkened unto the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came back into him, and he revived. And Elijah took the child, and brought him down out of the upper chamber into the house, and delivered him unto his mother; and Elijah said: 'See, thy son liveth.' And the woman said to Elijah: 'Now I know that thou art a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in thy mouth is truth.'

A young boy, an only child, experiences a near death experience even though he seems to be completely innocent. In fact, the careful reader of the preceding verses in this chapter senses that this near-death experience occurred not because anything that this young boy had done

but rather because of something Elijah, who was staying in the boy's house at the time, did. Earlier in the chapter we are told that Elijah decreed a drought over the land because many of the people followed the lead of their king Ahab and became involved in idolatry. Hashem, **Rashi** explains on verse seven quoting the Talmud, was unhappy that Elijah had decreed a drought. The people had sinned; strict judgment demanded that these sinners experience a drought and the resulting hunger. That is why Hashem fulfilled Elijah's decree. And yet Hashem wanted the hunger to stop; He wanted to convince Elijah that the draught and ensuing hunger was causing more harm than good. And so He forced Elijah to confront the results of the hunger Elijah had decreed in the body of a lifeless child and the pained words of the child's mother. It is interesting to note that Elijah's first prayer on behalf of the child does not result in Hashem reviving the child. It is only after Elijah prostrates himself on the boy and literally comes face-to-face with the destruction that his drought has wrought that Elijah is able to muster a tefilah sincere enough to cause Hashem to listen. Having confronted the results of the famine that he decreed, Elijah is no longer interested in maintaining his attitude of strict judgment towards Bnei Yisrael; he is ready to battle the people's sins with mercy and kindness. It is only then that the mother of this child with whom Elijah has been living for at least a year tells him that she knows he is a man of God and that the words that he speaks on behalf of God are true. In the more symbolic word of the Talmud Sanhedrin 113A:

When God saw there was suffering in the world on account of the drought

---

---

and that Elijah was not inclined to let the drought end God commanded Elijah saying "Arise go to Zarfath. And it was after these events that the son of the woman who was the mistress of the house took ill. When the boy died, Elijah asked God that He give him the key of resurrection so that Elijah could revive the dead child. God said to Elijah: There are three keys that were not entrusted to an agent-the key of childbirth, the key of rain and the key of resurrection. I have already made an exception and gave you the key to rain. Now you request a second key, the key to resurrection? Is it proper that two keys are in the hands of the student and one in the hand of the teacher? Bring back the key of rain and take in its place the key of resurrection. Elijah was forced to give up his control of rain in order to resurrect the child. Then, God decreed an end to the drought.

And still we are puzzled. Why couldn't Hashem teach Elijah this important lesson in a way that would not traumatize a blameless boy? He is all-powerful; surely he could have conceived of a less painful manner in which to teach Elijah about the importance for a prophet to balance a sense of strict judgment with feelings of love and mercy. There is one more piece of the puzzle which may help us understand why Hashem used this boy as the messenger through which to teach Elijah the importance of mercy. According to the midrash (as quoted by **Radak** and others) the woman in whose home Elijah stayed was the mother of Jonah and therefore the woman's only child must be none other than the prophet Jonah. It is Jonah, whose own struggles with balancing mercy and judgment we read about on Yom Kippur that was the recipient of Elijah's new-found respect for the efficacy of using more compassion and less anger in convincing *Bnei Yisrael* to abandon idolatry. Or in other words, Jonah owes his life to Elijah's realization that mercy must sometimes trump strict justice- the very same realization that will be necessary for Jonah's

ultimate success as a prophet. A prophet, as Hashem attempts to teach Jonah throughout the book of Jonah, must be able to forgive and be merciful. He must be able to relate to the Jewish people and all of mankind compassionately because that is the way Hashem relates to mankind. Although much of the story of Jonah is about Hashem teaching Jonah this important lesson, Jonah's experience as a child should make it easier to embrace and celebrate this lesson. After all, strict judgment would have called for the famine to continue and for Jonah's life to have been lost as an unintended but natural consequence of the sinning of the people during Jonah's youth. Jonah owes his life to the fact that the world can only exist when Hashem and his prophets strike a proper balance between strict judgment and mercy. No doubt Jonah's earlier near-death experience makes it easier for him to embrace that message as an adult prophet.

Our life-goal is to be true to who we are: an image of God. And yet there are life experiences which seem to make it difficult to fulfill our mission. We experience sickness or loss and the resulting malaise and we wonder what purpose such pain could possibly serve in our life. We can learn much from the life of Jonah. His life mission was to be an agent for Hashem's mercy and kindness in this world. No doubt he and those who loved him wondered what if any benefit would result from his painful childhood experience. He could not have known then that as an adult, the lesson of that experience would empower him to carry out his life's mission. We must believe that all of our life experiences come from Hashem and that they will ultimately empower us to carry out our life mission: to be true to our divine self and to be the messengers of God's word and will in this world.

---