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Jonah and the Great City
3: 1-10



This chapter concerns **ADONAI** and **the Ninevites**, with **Yonah** as **God's** agent. **The chosen prophet's** coming dispute with **YHVH** is not anticipated. **The son of Amittai** is called once again, goes to **Nineveh**, and preaches; **the Ninevites** repent, and **the LORD** forgives **them**. This chapter may be summarized in three words: **overthrown, repentance,** and **compassion.** These words represent the three major actions in chapter three: **Jonah's** preaching, **the Ninevites'** giving up their evil ways, and **God's** mercy. They also represent the eternal truth of a genuine relationship between sinners and **Ha'Shem**. Reconciliation with **YHVH** is a threefold movement.

This three-part pattern is common in **God's** relationship with Isra'el. In **1 Samuel 7:3-11**, the Philistines threatened Isra'el. The children of Abraham put away their Ba'al and Ashtoreth idols and gathered at Mizpah for repentance. They came under attack, but **the LORD** delivered them with a thunderstorm. This general pattern is repeated in **Esther 4** in Persia (see my commentary on **Esther, to see link click Ba – I Will Go to the King: If I Perish, I Perish**), in **Ezra 8:21-23** at the Ahava Canal, and in **Joel 2:11-19**. In each of these cases, the Israelites were under the threat of being **overturned** in destruction. They turned to **ADONAI** in **repentance**, and were delivered by **God's compassion**. In **Jonah** the same pattern is seen in **the Assyrian** enemy.

Overthrowing (*hapak*) means *wholesale, complete, sudden change*, either for the

worse (destruction) or for the better (conversion). On the first day in **Nineveh**, **the Jewish prophet** proclaimed: **Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown (3:4). The Ninevites** obviously understood the threat of *hapak* and feared destruction. But when **God** says **He** will *hapak* them, there is a possibility it means something positive. **God** may change them for good. The word carries this dual meaning throughout the TaNaKh. **Overthrown** (*hapak*) has two possibilities in this chapter. The first is **destruction** (*ra'ah*) meaning *evil* or *calamity*, and the second is **repentance**, *t'shuvah* (noun), *shuv* (verb), meaning *repent* or *turn.*

The Hebrew word for **destruction** (*ra'ah*) in **3:10** is translated differently in various English translations: **the evil (KJV, RSV)**, **calamity (NRSV, NASB)**, **punishment (CJB)** and **destruction (NIV)**. It is useful to look at several translations to see the wide semantic range of the word *ra'ah*. **God** does not **do evil**, which is the basic meaning of *ra'ah*. The meaning of *ra'ah* in the TaNaKh depends on the eye of the beholder. **The LORD** called **the prophet** to preach because of **Nineveh's** *ra'ah* **(wickedness 1:2)**. **The sailors** considered **the storm** a *ra'ah* **(calamity 1:7, trouble 1:8)**. **The king of Nineveh** knew that his **people** were engaged in all kinds of *ra'ah* **(evil 3:8)**. **God saw that they turned from their** *ra'ah* **(evil ways), and He did not bring on them the** *ra'ah* **(destruction)** that **he had threatened (3:10).** So *ra'ah* can be **wickedness**, or it can be **destruction**.

Believers experience the same dilemma today. Do we view *ra'ah* as **evil** or as just? On what basis do **God's** people decide about their experiences and the experiences of others? When **calamity** falls as a righteous judgment on the wicked, do we rejoice and hope for another kind of **overthrowing**? **Yonah** did not approve of a **God** who relents in sending c**alamity (4:2c).** But another kind of **overthrowing** is offered to those who recognize justice, even the justice of **God's destruction**.

*Dear Just and Holy Heavenly **Father**! How perfect **You** are! **Your** mercy is awesome and so is your justice. So often people want mercy when they have sinned, but **Your** holiness demands that mercy is offered only when the heart is truly repentant and has turned from the sin to following your holy path of righteousness. **How awesome Your forgiveness, but that is for those who lovingly have a reverent fear of You. As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him (Psalms 103:13, First John 1:9).***

*Praise **You** that though **You** do forgive in mercy all who come humbly to bow in love before **You, You** also will justly punish all who seek only their own good and*

*who marginalize **You**. **Throw the worthless servant out, into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mt 25:30). The Father loves the Son and has given everything into His hand. He who trusts in the Son has eternal life. He who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him (Jn 3:35-36). You** are worthy of all our love and worship. It will be wonderful to praise **Your** great and holy name in heaven forever! In **Yeshua's** holy name and power of **His** resurrection. Amen*

Repentance before **Ha'Shem** is blind to race or culture. **Overthrowing** is also used in **chapter three** to describe **repentance** (*shuv*). **Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up** (*shuv*) or turn from **their evil ways and their violence (3:8b). When God saw what they did and how they turned** (*shuv*) **from their evil ways, he relented** with compassion **(3:10). Yonah** did not preach specifically to Gentiles but against wickedness. **ADONAI** makes the same call to **turn from evil practices** for all of **His** human creation **(Second Chronicles 7:14; Jeremiah 25:5, 26:3-6)**.

Therefore, **Jonah** is read annually on Yom Kippur (see my commentary on **Exodus Go – The Day of Atonement**). It is read as a model for the proper attitude for repentance with **Isaiah's** description of proper fasting **(Isaiah 58:4-7)**. **The rabbis teach that this reading reflects the view that this book depicts the concept of repentance so starkly and completely that it can stir hearers to repent of their ways and even modifies their conduct. The Ninevites'** repentance and **YHVH's** forgiveness reject the ancient view, expressed by **the disagreeable prophet** . . . that only punishment can cleanse sin. The sovereign **LORD** accepted **the Ninevites'** repentance of **their** wickedness and **they** were forgiven. **The people's turning** in **repentance** (*shuv*) is mirrored by **God's turning** with **compassion** (*naham*). **God** had **compassion and did not bring on them the destruction He had planned (3:10).**

Compassion means that **God relented** from **His** impending calamity. **The LORD** had **compassion** and **Jonah** complained the **He** relented from sending **disaster**. The words **relent** and **compassion** come from the Hebrew word *naham*. To an Israelite, to **repent** was to **turn** (*shuv*) from pride to **compassion**. To turn toward **God** meant to **comfort** the oppressed and dispossessed (see my commentary on **Isaiah Hc – Comfort, Comfort My People Says Your God**). To **comfort** the widow, fatherless and the foreigner meant **repenting** of one's self-serving ways of pride. To have **compassion** was to turn from one's own selfish ideals concerning wealth and acknowledge **God's** viewpoint. True **repentance** meant that

compassion and **comfort** would increase in the world.

The timeless truth of **Jonah 3** is that compassion is a primary attribute of **Ha'Shamayim**. When it comes to justice, **the LORD** would rather be known as a **God** who forgives and is just. This is exactly what **Yonah** bitterly complains about: **Isn't this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity (4:2).**

God's openness to change strict judgment is part of **His** character from the beginning of **His** dealings with Isar'el. At Mount Sinai, during the golden calf incident (see my commentary on **Exodus Gs – Now Leave Me Alone So That My Anger May Burn Against Your People**), **Moshe** pleaded with **Ha'Shem** to **relent** (*naham*) and have **compassion** in the midst of calamity. **YHVH** did **relent**, in striking similarity to **Nineveh**. **Then God relented** (*naham*) **and did not bring on His people the disaster He had threatened (Exodus 32:14).** In **Yonah**, **God had compassion** (*naham*) **and did not bring on them the destruction He had threatened (Jonah 3:10).**

ADONAI is not like us. **He** is free to judge the rebellious by strict justice and not forgive them when they **repent**. But **God** is also free *not* to judge the rebellious by strict justice and to forgive them when they **repent**. David knew this eternal truth. When his son by Bathsheba was ill as a result of his murder and adultery, he said the same thing: **While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, "Who knows? God may be gracious to me and let the child live" (2 Sam 12:22).** In David's case, **YHVH** judged according to strict justice.

YHVH is free from the necessity of strict justice and can pursue a better justice in **His** relentless love of **His** creation. The king of Nineveh also acknowledged **God's** freedom when he said: **Who knows? God may yet relent** (*naham*) **and with compassion turn from His fierce anger so that we will not perish (4:9). ADONAI's** judgment of **destruction** is just, but **His** compassion may prevail. The reality of **Yonah** is that **the Ninevites** of **his** day were not punished for **their** wickedness. **They** did not force the hand of **the Grandmaster**, however, nor were they certain of **God's** response. It could have gone either way.

To really understand **God's** compassion, we need to understand our need and our desperate spiritual situation. This leads us to humbly acknowledge: **Who knows?**

The heart that believes in its own righteousness cannot receive even the certainty of **Yeshua's** love and forgiveness. The fact that the hearts of the violent can be **overthrown** by the mere hint of **God's** compassion is precisely the point of **Yonah's** argument in **chapter 4**.

A The LORD's Speech (3:1-2)

B Nineveh the great city (3:3)

C Jonah enters the city (3:4)

D The Ninevites Believe God and Repent (3:5-9)

E God did not bring on them the destruction He had planned (3:10)

D Jonah is angry because the Ninevites Repented (4:1-4)

C Jonah leaves the city (4:5-8)

B Nineveh the great city (4:11)

A The LORD's Speech (4:10-11)

Chapters three and **four** should be viewed as one unit. The scenes alternate: in the country **(3:1-3)**, in **the city (3:4** to **4:4)**, and in the country **(4:5-11)**. **Nineveh** is called **the great city** at the beginning and end of the section.[75]