

At the end of Sefer Yona HaShem teaches Yona a lesson about why the prophet should have given over the chance to repent, even to a nation other than the Israelites.

וְאֲנִי לֹא אֲחֹס עַל־נִינְוָה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה אֲשֶׁר יֵשְׁבָהּ הַרְבֵּה  
 מִשְׁתִּים־עֶשְׂרֵה רְבֹו אָדָם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָדַע בֵּין־יְמִינֹו לְשִׁמְאֹלוֹ וּבִהְמָה  
 רְבֵה:

“And should not I care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many animals as well!” (Jona 4:11).

The message is clear. After all Yona did to avoid trying to help non-Israelites, HaShem was making the point, *all people are my people*. Even Yona’s concern that they would do more teshuva than the Israelites do, the point is—there is an entire world out there of HaShem’s children and creations. They all deserve life. Certainly, Am Yisrael deserved life. Ultimately, the Torah is for all people. The entire world is to open its eyes and know HaShem. “I will make you a light of Nations.” (Isaiah 49:6). Chronologically, Yona was prophet for the Kings of Israel (circa King Yerovom II) a short time before Yishayahu was prophet for the Kings of Yehuda (circa King Chizkyia). This concept that Israel should not think itself the monopoly over Hashem’s favor commences to take root. It could be that until this time, the Israelites were under the teaching and belief that they were alone unto HaShem because they were HaShem’s chosen people (Deuteronomy 7:6).

There is a deep message here.

The Gemara Bechoros 4b challenges: “Perhaps even so, the number of ordinary animals of the Levites that were not firstborn corresponded to the number of firstborn animals belonging to the Israelites. The Gemara explains that the verse states: “Take the Levites in exchange for all the firstborn among the children of Israel, and the animal of (*behemat*) the Levites in exchange for their animals (*behemtam*)” (Numbers 3:45). The use of the word *behemat* in the singular indicates that the transaction involved one animal of the Levites in exchange for many animals of the Israelites. The Gemara asks: And say the word *behemat* is referring to many animals, as in the phrase: “And many animals (*uvhema rabba*)” (Jonah 4:11). The Gemara answers: If so, let the verse write either: *Behema* of the Levites in exchange for *behema*, or: *Behemtam* in exchange for *behemtam*. What is the significance of the phrase “*behemat* the Levites in exchange for *behemtam*”? Learn from it that one lamb of a Levite rendered many donkeys of Israelites exempt.” At first glance Chazal is teaching us a linguistic lesson from the word for many animals in Yona. There is more.

Rashi says that the “beasts” in the verse is not necessarily actual animals. He says the verse “do not know their right from their left” refers to children, and “and many animals as well” refers to adults—who have the intelligence of beasts by not knowing who created them.

Ibin Ezra says that there are 120,000 people who perhaps not all of them sin, just as animals do not sin. Either way, they are all in danger because HaShem destroyed the city of Sodom. Therefore, destruction of an entire people is on the line. The world already had the lesson of Sodom. Do I have to destroy another people with their animals?

It appears from the Ibin Ezra that HaShem already set an example with Sodom and held back mercy because He could not find nine people in the city without sin. The sinful behavior

must have permeated men, women, and children. Here, however, it was not the entire city. Children and others were without sin, so mercy should not be withheld.

Malbim adds to this “And should I not care about Nineveh: who are the work of My hands, which is precious, because it is the great city even though many practice idolatry there. Does it not have more than 120,000 people who do not know their right from their left, who do not know how to distinguish between worshiping the Lord who supports them from the right...and worshiping the false gods of the left? No, they should not be punished for their lack of understanding, and neither should the beasts, because even if the people sinned, what sin did the beasts do? And thus Jonah received an answer on the punishment in store for Israel, because they had already been taught the difference between the right and the left, i.e. monotheism vs. idolatry. They had already received the true Divine religion, and they deserved punishment for their idolatry, even as the people of Nineveh would punish or be punished for this.”

I would add that certainly the children of idolaters are not to blame. The Israelites, however, have clear instruction on rearing their children from very young (the Shema, the mitzvah of hakeil) to know and serve only HaShem.

Radak points out that “Persons/adam” in our verse means “men and women.” The verse “did not know” refers to “small children, too, or others who do not know between their right and their left. There is no sin by those and they would only be punished because of their fathers. Beasts also are not deserving of punishment. The entire city and all living things are deserving of mercy if the fault is really from only the fathers/adults.” The Radak seems to infer that it was only the adult males who sinned and the entire city should not be destroyed because of only them. Mercy is looking at every creation.

There are a few lessons here. Clearly, the Gemara in Brochos is saying that there are levels of holiness and importance. Levite animals are more important than common Israelite animals. Chosen Israel is more important than gentile Ninveh. Conversely, Israel is held to a higher standard because it is incumbent on the adults to teach the children. Thus, if Israel sins, it risks being wholesale destroyed, as it was during both sacks of the Batei Mikdash. Furthermore, we have a lesson about mercy and how HaShem judges the world. For good we can attach ourselves to a kehilla and gain the benefit of the righteous in the group. Our prayers and judgment can be included for the Good in those that are more righteous and worthy, as long as we cling to the group and join them.

On the other hand, when scrutinizing evil and sin, HaShem is careful not to sweep one up with the rest. If the repentant realizes and acknowledges that he or she is HaShem's creation, then that repentant is no worse off than an animal, free of sin, and deserving of mercy. If the repentant denies being the creation—detaches that bond—and prides him or herself as being an independent human, with intellect, thought, and freedom from responsibility, then the judgment can be harsher.

This Yom Kippur, may we be firmly part of the kehilla, may we be organized together as one to do the Will of HaShem, and may HaShem judge us with mercy, kindness, and grant us Good Life.

Gmar Chaima Tova.