



Too Far for Teshuva?

Class 2

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1. שמות י"ד:כ"ו-כ"ח

²⁶ וַיֹּאמֶר יי אֶל־מֹשֶׁה נָטָה אֶת־יָדְךָ עַל־הַיָּם וַיָּשָׁבוּ הַמַּיִם עַל־מִצְרַיִם עַל־רֶכֶבָּו וְעַל־פָּרָשָׁיו: ²⁷ וַיִּטְּ מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יָדוֹ עַל־הַיָּם וַיָּשָׁב הַיָּם לִפְנוֹת בִּלְקֹר לְאִיתָנוּ וּמִצְרַיִם נָסִים לִקְרֹאתוֹ וַיִּנָּעַר יי אֶת־מִצְרַיִם בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם: ²⁸ וַיָּשָׁבוּ הַמַּיִם וַיִּכְסּוּ אֶת־הָרֶכֶב וְאֶת־הַפָּרָשִׁים לְכָל־חֵיל פְּרָעָה הַבָּאִים אַחֲרֵיהֶם בָּיָם לֹא־נִשְׁאָר בָּהֶם עַד־אֶחָד:

1. Exodus 14:26-28

²⁶ Then God said to Moses, “Hold out your arm over the sea, that the waters may come back upon the Egyptians and upon their chariots and upon their horsemen.” ²⁷ Moses held out his arm over the sea, and at daybreak the sea returned to its normal state, and the Egyptians fled at its approach. But God hurled the Egyptians into the sea. ²⁸ The waters turned back and covered the chariots and the horsemen: Pharaoh’s entire army that had followed them into the sea, to the last man.

2. דעת זקנים על שמות י"ד:כ"ח:א'

לא נשאר בהם עד אחד. אבל אחד נשאר והוא פרעה והא דכתיב בספר תהלים אחד מהם לא נותר היינו מכל עמו:

2. Daat Zkenim on Exodus 14:28:1

לא נשאר בהם עד אחד, “to the last man.” The word עד is sometimes used as an *inclusive* statement whereas other times it is used as *exclusion*, i.e. in this instance the meaning is that



only a single Egyptian survived this drowning. The survivor was Pharaoh himself. ... The Torah refers to all of Pharaoh's soldiers having perished. Pharaoh himself was forced to survive and bear the disgrace of his defeat.

3. פרקי דרבי אליעזר מ"ג:ח'

ר' נחוניא בן הקנה אומר, תדע לך כח התשובה בא וראה מפרעה מלך מצרים שמרד בצור עליון הרבה מאד שנ' "מי ה' אשר אשמע בקולו?" ובלשון שחטא בו בלשון עשה תשובה שנ' מי כמוך באלים ה' מי כמוך נאדר בקדש והצילו הב"ה בין המתים והלך ומלך בגנוה והיו אנשי נינוה גוזלים איש את ריעהו. וכששלח הקב"ה ליונה להנבא עליה להחריבה שמע פרעה ועמד מכסאו וקרע בגדיו ולבש שק ואפר והכריז בכל עמו שיצומו כל העם שני ימים מה עשה העמיד האנשים מצד אחד והנשים מצד אחר וכל בהמה....

3. Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 43:8

Rabbi Nechunia, son of Hakkanah, said: Know thou the power of repentance. Come and see from Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who rebelled most grievously against the Rock, the Most High, as it is said, "Who is the Lord, that I should hearken unto his voice?" (Ex. 5:2). In the same terms of speech in which he sinned, he repented, as it is said "Who is like thee, O Lord, among the mighty?" (Ex. 15:11). The Holy One, blessed be He, delivered him from amongst the dead.

... He went and ruled in Nineveh. The men of Nineveh were writing fraudulent deeds, and everyone robbed his neighbour, and they committed sodomy, and such-like wicked actions.

When the Holy One, blessed be He, sent for Jonah, to prophesy against (the city) its destruction, Pharaoh hearkened and arose from his throne, rent his garments and clothed himself in sackcloth and ashes, and had a proclamation made to all his people, that all the people should fast for two days, and all who did these (wicked) things should be burnt by fire.

What did they do? The men were on one side, and the women on the other, and their children were by themselves; all the clean animals were on one side, and their offspring were by themselves. The infants saw the breasts of their mothers, (and they wished) to have suck, and they wept. The mothers saw their children, (and they wished) to give them suck. By the merit of 4123 children more than twelve hundred thousand men (were saved), as it is said, "And should not I have pity on Nineveh, that great city; wherein are more than six score thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?" (Jonah 4:11); "And the Lord repented of the evil, which he said he would do unto them" (Jonah 3:10). For forty years was the Holy One, blessed be He, slow to anger with them, corresponding to the forty days during which He had sent Jonah. After forty years they



returned to their many evil deeds, more so than their former ones, and they were swallowed up like the dead, in the lowest Sheol, as it is said, “Out of the city of the dead they groan” (Job 24:12).

4. משנה תורה, הלכות תשובה ב:א.

אי זו היא תשובה גמורה. זה שבא לידו דבר שעבר בו ואפשר בידו לעשותו ופרש ולא עשה מפני התשובה. לא מיראה ולא מכשולון כח.

4. Rambam Hilkhhot Teshuvah 2:1

[Who has reached] complete Teshuvah? A person who confronts the same situation in which he sinned when he has the potential to commit [the sin again], and, nevertheless, abstains and does not commit it because of his Teshuvah alone and not because of fear or a lack of strength.

5. משנה תורה, הלכות תשובה ב:ד.

מדרכי התשובה להיות השב צועק תמיד לפני השם בבכי ובתחנונים ועושה צדקה כפי כחו ומתרחק הרבה מן הדבר שחטא בו ומשנה שמו כלומר אני אחר ואיני אותו האיש שעשה אותן המעשים ומשנה מעשיו כלן לטובה ולדרך ישרה וגולה ממקומו. שגלות מכפרת עון מפני שגורמת לו להפגע ולהיות ענו ושפל רוח:

5. Rambam Hilkhhot Teshuvah 2:4

Among the paths of repentance is for the penitent to a) constantly call out before God, crying and entreating; b) to perform charity according to his potential; c) to separate himself far from the object of his sin; d) to change his name, as if to say “I am a different person and not the same one who sinned;” e) to change his behavior in its entirety to the good and the path of righteousness; and f) to travel in exile from his home. Exile atones for sin because it causes a person to be submissive, humble, and meek of spirit.



6. Yerushalmi Ta'anit 2:3

Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Levi said: This was a deceitful repentance. What did they do? ... they placed nursing calves inside and their mothers outside, nursing donkeys inside, and the mothers outside; these [the suckling offspring] were crying from their side [from hunger] and these [the mothers] were crying from their side. They [the people of Nineveh] said [to God]: If you will not have mercy on us, we will not have mercy upon these [animals].

7. Surviving the Flood, Tali Adler

We ask the wrong questions about the story of the Flood.

We ask how God could do such a thing. We ask how a God who is good could destroy a world. We ask how a just God could ignore the difference between perpetrator and victim in His zeal to wipe the world clean. We ask how a loving God could abandon His creation.

The right question, for anyone who knows the names Auschwitz, Treblinka, or Babi Yar, is not how God could have done such a thing. The right question for those who remember is how it is that God has never been compelled to do it again.

These are the unspeakable questions that these places dare us to ask: What merit can the human race possibly have that outweighs the horror of its crimes? What human accomplishment, joy, or meaning can matter enough to make it defensible for the world to continue spinning while children are incinerated?

The aftermath of the Flood answers these questions without dissembling. There is no merit great enough. Humanity endures not because of its merit but because of God's promise. The



rainbow, the sign of God's covenant never to destroy the world again, is a symbol of the starkest sort of hope in its promise that even when humanity is at its worst—even when we might wish that another flood would come because, on some level, an end to all would be better than a world suffused with this much evil—there will be a future.

The promise is the end to a nightmare, but it is also a form of abandonment: there is no possibility of a reset. God will not wipe out evildoers in favor of a new world created for one innocent man and his descendents. Instead, the world keeps spinning. Victims and perpetrators, in the aftermath, live side by side, and their descendents must learn to share this world, soaked with countless tears and oceans of blood.

What happens in the aftermath of the unspeakable in a world promised, destined, and doomed to continue to exist?

In the final verses of Yonah, the story of the reluctant prophet, we are given the beginnings of an answer.

Yonah, who shares a name with the dove Noah sends out of the ark to survey the newly destroyed world, seems to yearn for a world in which God never issued His promise. It is understandable: Nineveh is the capital of the Assyrian empire, notoriously cruel, that will ultimately exile and destroy Israel's Ten Tribes. Yonah does not want to be the messenger that warns Nineveh, offering them a chance to repent and escape God's wrath. Yonah yearns for a world in which justice reigns, in which shedding innocent blood inevitably leads to mass destruction.

When Yonah realizes that Nineveh will be spared, he cries out to God:

Yonah 4:2-3

2He prayed to God, saying, "O God! Isn't this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I know that You are a



compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing Punishment. Please, God, take my life, for I would rather die than live.”

Yonah expresses the anguish of a world in which mercy outweighs justice. How can it be that this city, famous for its cruelty, will survive? How can it be that a society that reigns by fear and blood and death can be offered the possibility of a future?

God does not justify Nineveh’s continued existence by pointing to their repentance or saying that their future good deeds will somehow outweigh the evil they have done. Those considerations are irrelevant here. Instead, God offers this reply:

Yonah 4:11

“...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 beasts as well!”

God’s response to Yonah is not about forgiveness. He does not say that because Nineveh has repented their sins should be forgotten. Instead, God tells Yonah the difference between how the prophet sees and how God sees. Where Yonah looks at Nineveh and sees a city, God looks and sees life: people and animals, struggling to survive. It is life—and God’s love of life—that keeps Nineveh standing.

If we are looking for justice or a grand cosmic accounting, Yonah’s ending leaves us with nothing. But if we are looking for a way to make sense of a world where there will never again be a flood, where the children of murderers and victims must live side by side, we find the kernel of a path forward.

This is why the world endures: not because there is forgiveness. Not because we have forgotten.



But because God loves life. Because where we see grand, faceless entities—a whole world that deserves destruction, countries and empires that bear collective guilt—God sees human beings, scared and hungry.

And perhaps the only chance we have for redemption in this blood-soaked world is for us to see them too.

