



STUDY GUIDE FOR SEFER YONAH

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Part One: General Overview (Issues Related to the Book as a Whole)

1) Themes of the Book

1) The book touches on many important issues, each of which can become the focal point of an entire class. As you learn the book, note how each of these themes is developed:

- 1) Power of Teshuva / Ways to do Teshuva
- 2) Attributes of Emet -vs Chesed (justice -vs- mercy)
- 3) God's power and control over nature (while in contrast, allowing free will in humans.)
- 4) Importance of Doing God's Bidding
- 5) Selfishness and Selflessness
- 6) Prophecy (heeding the call -vs- ability to refuse; prophet as protector/defender -vs- accuser; proving one's self a true prophet -this last rises more out of Chazal's understanding of Yonah's actions)
- 7) Power of prayer -vs- power of action
- 8) Relationship between Jews and Non-Jews
- 9) Second chances

2. Structure:

If you were to divide the book into subsections, how would you do so?

- a) Start by dividing the book in half, then further subdividing. What would you title each section?
- b) What parallels, both linguistic and conceptual, do you notice between the sections?
- c) What do you make of these? What might this structure highlight?

3. Literary artistry:

As you learn, find examples of each of the following: (In the questions, I have included examples

of each category, but there are more.)

1) מילים מנחות:

As you learn, note the various guiding words employed by the author. What are the significance of each of these? (Ex: וימן, גדול, roots related to rising and falling)

2) plays-on-words / alliteration: There are quite a few plays on words in the book. See, for instance, verses 1:5 and 4:6. Do you think these are included merely for their poetic effect or do they help to convey some message?

3) flashback / hidden information: At several points in the story the narrator only relays partial information to the reader; the rest is only revealed later in the story. For example, we only find out what Yonah is to say to the people of Nineveh in chapter 3. We are not told why he ran away until chapter four. In chapter one, we only find out tangentially that the sailors actually knew that Yonah was fleeing from God (1:10). What is the effect of relaying the story in this way?

4) Biblical allusions: Our story recalls several other stories or passages in Tanakh: the story of Sodom and Amarah, Elijah's trek to Horev, the 13 attributes of God, amongst others. As you go back to the parallel sources, compare the two and note what can be learned from both the similarities and the differences.

Study Guide Part Two

Chapter by Chapter Analysis

Introduction

Time period:

Sefer Yonah does not provide the reader with enough information to allow one to place the prophet in the larger historical picture. We are not told where הנני came from, when he lived, if he had any other prophecies besides that mentioned in our book etc. Many commentators have identified the prophet with the Yonah ben Amitai mentioned in 2Kings 14:25, who prophesied that Yeravam b. Yoash (the second Yeravam) would expand the borders of Israel. If so, he prophesied at a time when Assyria was one of the strongest powers in the Ancient Near East. (Within just a few years of Yeravam's death, Israel is paying tribute to the Assyrian Kings, and not long after they are exiled.) Sefer Yonah, though, makes no mention of any of this. It never even draws a connection between Nineveh and Assyria, suggesting that these facts are perhaps not crucial for a proper understanding of the book's main messages.

Chapter One: Yonah Flees

1) The call to prophecy: The book does not tell the reader what it is that Yonah is supposed to relay to the people of Nineveh anywhere in our chapter; we first find out in chapter 3:4. What is the effect of this literary technique?

2) Why does Yonah run away? Why doesn't he want to do as God commands him? Almost all commentators on the book discuss this question, but in order to best evaluate the various opinions (and form one of your own) it pays to first learn through the entire book. As you do so, try to find clues that might suggest an answer; pay attention also to Yonah's own explanation in the beginning of chapter four. Sources for further study:

a) Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer chapter 10, and similarly, see the introduction in Olam HaTanakh on our book.

b) Rashi and Radak on 1:3

c) Daat Mikra, introduction pages 7-9

3) How can Yonah possibly think that he will be able to run away from God? (See Rashi and Radak on 1:3 What is the difference between the phrases "mipnei hashem" and "milifnei hashem"?)

4) The sailors

a) The chapter sets up Yonah and the sailors as foils to each other. Compare and contrast the behavior of each.

b) Trace how the sailors move closer to a recognition of God as the story progresses. Note the triple usage of the root נָחַ (verses 5, 10 and 16) and how it helps portray the

development.

c) The chapter paints the sailors in a positive light. List the various acts of kindness that they perform. Why do you think the prophet thought it important to include all these details; what message do they hold for the reader / story as a whole?

5) Yonah

a) Note Yonah's various actions in our chapter. When is he active? When is he passive?

b) How would you describe his state of mind when in the boat?

c) Yonah is not the only leader to hesitate about heeding God's call to prophecy. Moshe, in Exodus chapters 3- 4, Gidon in Judges chapter 6, and Jeremiah (chapter 1 there) all initially refuse God's call as well. How do these leader's refusals differ from that of Yonah?

Chapter Two: The Prayer

1) What do you think is God's purpose in having Yonah swallowed by the fish? What is he supposed to learn from the episode?

The pictorial symbol for the city of Nineveh is a fish within a house. In light of this fact, what symbolism might the fish hold for our story?

2) How would you characterize Yonah's prayer? Is it a request? thanks? something else?

a) Do Yonah's words contain any hint of remorse for his actions? admittance of guilt or repentance?

b) What is the central theme of the prayer?

3) Analyze the prayer in terms of both its structure and literary techniques. Break it apart into its individual sections. Note metaphors, imagery, parallelisms, and any refrains or repeated words.

a) What images does Yonah use to depict his distress? his hopes for salvation?

b) How does the prayer relate to the specific situation that Yonah

finds himself in? List all the words and images that relate to the sea or being swallowed up

c) What is the irony of Yonah's words in verse 5?

d) Compare the final verse of the prayer with the last verse in chapter one. Relate to question 4a in chapter one above.

Chapter Three: Nineveh Repents

1) Verses 5-9 describe the repentance of the people of Nineveh.

a) List all the actions done as part of the inhabitants' "return"?

b) Who participates in these actions?

2) Compare verses 9-10 here with Exodus 32:12,14 and Jeremiah 26:3 and 36:7. Who is the speaker of these verses in our book? Who would you have expected to be the speaker?

3) A Comparison

The cry "In 40 days Nineveh will be overturned" recalls another "overturning" in Tanakh - that of סדום ועמורה (see Genesis 19:25). In both cases, a city's inhabitants do so much evil that God decrees destruction. In both cases, a prophet is told of the decision - but here the similarity ends. Compare the differing reactions of Yonah and Avraham to God's news; what does it highlight about each leader?

Chapter Four: The Gourd

1) How do you understand Yonah's complaint of verses 1-3? About what is הנוי upset; why does he want to die? How would each of the exegetes listed above (question 1 in chapter one) approach these questions?

2) In verse 2, Yonah quotes from the "thirteen attributes" of God. Compare Yonah's words with the attributes as they appear in Exodus 34:6-7. How do they differ; what is missing from Yonah's list? What can you learn from this?

3) "Take my life from me" - Yonah is not the only leader who is brought to such despair that he requests death. Elijah, too, cries out, "take my soul" (1Kings 19:4).

a) Compare what it was that led each leader to this request.

b) What other points of contact can you find between the two leaders?

c) An interesting aside: There is a midrash that identifies Yonah as the boy that Elijah brought back to life in 1Kings 17:22.

4) What message does God intend for Yonah through the episode with the gourd?

a) How do you think each of the exegetes mentioned above (questions on chapter 1) would explain the parable?

b) Compare verses 3-4 with 8-9. What does the similarity in language highlight?

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The Message of the Book

1) What is the main message of our book? Before looking at the opinions of various commentators - what do you think? Support your answer!

a) Many suggest that the book contains an important message regarding the power of teshuva. Thus, too, many explain why it has been chosen as the haftara for Yom HaKippurim. Do you agree that this is the main message of the book? If so, where would you have expected the book to end? What is the meaning of chapter four?