

# 10 QUESTIONS

## TO ASK YOURSELF WHILE READING YONAH

### Chapter 1

Hashem speaks to the prophet Yonah and instructs him to go to the Assyrian city of Nineveh. Yonah must announce to the people of Nineveh that they have become wicked, and that unless they do teshuva, Hashem will destroy the city. Despite hearing the clear command from Hashem, Yonah refuses to fulfill this mission. Instead, he runs away on a boat headed for Tarshish. While on the boat, Hashem causes a huge storm to rock the boat. The sailors all pray to their gods in desperation, and draw lots to ascertain who among them is responsible for this terrible storm. The lot falls on Yonah, who has meanwhile been sleeping in his cabin. Yonah admits to the sailors that he is indeed responsible for causing the storm - apparently Hashem is mad at Yonah for running away from fulfilling his mission. Yonah suggests that the sailors throw him overboard. The sailors reluctantly agree, and as soon as Yonah is overboard, the storm subsides. The sailors are shaken and thoroughly impressed by these events. They vow to begin serving Hashem.

1. Why do we read the story of Yonah on Yom Kippur? It's a fabulous work, but why read it now?
2. Why did Yonah run away? What (or who) was he trying to escape from?
3. Assuming that Yonah was running away from God, how would that help? Shouldn't a prophet like Yonah know that you can't run away from God?
4. While Yonah was on the ship, a terrible storm was brewing outside. At that point, Yonah decided to take a nap. Seems like a strange time to nap. What was Yonah thinking?

### Chapter 2

Yonah is swallowed by a huge fish and spends three days and three nights inside the fish. He prays to Hashem, who hears Yonah's prayers and commands the fish to spit him out onto dry land.

5. Why did God save Yonah by sending a fish to swallow him up? Why didn't God just let Yonah drown in the ocean? What's the metaphor behind the miracle? What might a fish represent?
6. Yonah managed to compose a moving prayer while inside the fish, but he spoke about being freed from the fish in past tense. Why did Yonah talk about his salvation in past tense? He was still inside the fish at the time! A little premature, no?

### Chapter 3

Hashem instructs Yonah to go to Nineveh. This time, he goes. Nineveh is a huge city; it takes three days to walk across it. Yonah spends a day in the city and announces that "In 40 days' time, Nineveh will be overturned!" This ominous prediction prompts a massive repentance from the citizens of Nineveh, spearheaded by the King of Nineveh himself. Hashem is pleased with their efforts and decides not to destroy Nineveh after all.

7. Seems like Yonah was willing to go to Nineveh after he was spit out of the fish. What caused this change of heart? Was he just afraid of being swallowed up again? Or did something shift in his perspective?
8. When Nineveh repented, the story emphasized that their animals were involved in the teshuva process as well. Why did the people of Nineveh include their animals in the teshuva process?

### Chapter 4

After witnessing Nineveh's teshuva, Yonah sets up camp outside of the city and feels very distressed. He asks Hashem to take his life. Hashem declines, and Yonah builds a hut for himself to live in. Hashem causes a tree to grow overnight and give Yonah some shade. This makes Yonah very happy. In the morning, Hashem causes a worm to destroy the tree and a strong hot wind to blow. Yonah faints. When he wakes up, Hashem asks him if he is upset about the tree's destruction. Yonah replies that he is so upset, he'd rather die. Hashem responds that if Yonah can be so upset about the destroyed tree, how could Hashem not be upset about the destruction of Nineveh?

9. Yonah called out to Hashem with many of the familiar 13 Attributes of Mercy that are repeated many times throughout the High Holiday prayers. Usually, we say that Hashem is *אריך אפים ורב חסד ואמת*, but Yonah instead substitutes *אמת* (truth) for *ונחם על הרעה* (changes His Mind about inflicting evil). Why does Yonah make this change?
10. At the story's conclusion, Hashem destroyed the tree that provided shade to Yonah. Why is this the climax of the story? What message does it want to leave us with?