

(1) God summoned a big fish (גָּד) to swallow Yonah. Yonah remained in the bowels of the (male) fish (גָּד) for three days and three nights.

(2) Yonah prayed to Hashem his God from the bowels of the (female) fish (הַגָּד).

(3) He said, “I called out to Hashem from my suffering and He answered me. I cried out from the belly of the underworld; You heard my voice.

YONAH IS SWALLOWED BY TWO FISH

Consider the following questions:

1. Why did Hashem choose to have Yonah swallowed up by a fish rather than afflict him with some other kind of punishment?
2. Why does it say that Hashem summoned a big fish “to swallow Yonah” rather than saying Hashem summoned a big fish “and it swallowed Yonah”?
3. Why is Yonah’s name repeated twice in verse 1 instead of using a pronoun the second time (“... to swallow Yonah. **He** remained, etc.”)?
4. Our Sages¹ tell us that initially a male fish swallowed Yonah. However, when after three days and three nights Yonah had still not prayed for help, Hashem had it spit him out into the mouth of a female fish that was pregnant and full of tens of thousands of tiny fish.²

1. *Otzar HaMidrashim* (Eisenstein), *Yonah*, p. 219. See Rashi to our verse.

2. See Rashi here who refers to these tiny fish as “embryos.” It seems that the fish was a mammal like a whale which develops embryos rather than a normal fish with eggs.

(א) וַיִּמַן ה' דָּג גָּדוֹל לִבְלַעַ אֶת־יוֹנָה וַיְהִי יוֹנָה בְּמִעֵי הַדָּג שְׁלֹשָׁה יָמִים וּשְׁלֹשָׁה לַיְלוֹת:

(ב) וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל יוֹנָה אֶל־ה' אֶל־הָיּו מִמִּעֵי הַדָּגָה:

(ג) וַיֹּאמֶר קְרָאתִי מִצָּרָה לִי אֶל־ה' וַיַּעֲנֵנִי מִבֶּטֶן שְׂאוֹל שׁוֹעֲתִי שְׁמַעַת קוֹלִי:

There, because he was hemmed in on all sides he began to pray to Hashem. This Midrash seems difficult to understand. Surely there is no more desperate situation than being trapped inside a fish! He would either be digested by the fish together with the other food or he would die from the hot, inhospitable environment. Why did Yonah not cry out to Hashem while he was still inside the male fish, even if there was room inside it?

5. Why particularly here (in verse 2) does it describe Hashem as *his [Yonah's] God*?
6. It says that Yonah prayed to Hashem. But what was his prayer? It cannot be what it says in the next verse (“*I called out to Hashem from my suffering and He answered me*”) because that is not a prayer but a description of what happened to him.
7. Why does verse 3 say both “*I called out ... from my suffering*” and “*I cried out from the belly of the underworld*”? They seem to be making basically the same point.
8. Why does Yonah first say “*He answered me*” and after that “*You heard my voice*”? Surely Hashem heard Yonah’s voice before He answered him.

We know that Hashem takes into account and judges every aspect of a person's behavior. In judging Yonah, there were two contradictory aspects to consider, one positive and one negative. His intentions were positive, but what he actually did was negative. His intention in fleeing from before Hashem was to avoid bringing blame upon the Jewish people [for when the people of Nineveh would repent, it would reflect badly on the Jewish people, who did not respond to the entreaties and warnings of many prophets].³ For this reason, Yonah decided to flee to another land, since the spirit of prophecy does not rest on a person outside of the Land of Israel, and thus Hashem would not appear to him again and tell him the specifics of what he was supposed to say to the inhabitants of Nineveh.⁴ He meant well. Even so, his actions were blameworthy. He had fled from Hashem and thus deviated from what Hashem had commanded him, something for which there can be no justification. Therefore, when Yonah saw the terrible storm that was battering the ship, he was convinced that it was Hashem's will that he should drown in the very same sea which he had attempted to use as his means of escape. He accepted what he understood as God's judgment against him. This is why he told the sailors, (1:12), "*Lift me up and cast me into the sea.*" Our Sages⁵ imply that his intention from the very beginning was to die at sea rather than [carry out his mission and] bring blame upon Bnei Yisrael. But the plain meaning is that he had initially hoped to flee, and only now accepted that he was to be punished [with death].

3. As explained by Alshich above, 1:1–4. Yonah expected the people of Nineveh to repent because the *yetzer hara* does not attack them as forcefully as it does the Jewish people. This is because the holier a person is, the more his *yetzer hara* opposes him; the *yetzer hara* does not pride itself on overcoming the non-Jews in the same way as it does when it succeeds in contaminating the holiness of the Jewish people.

4. As explained by Alshich, loc. cit.

5. *Mechilta*, Bo 1.

Then Hashem decreed in His great wisdom that Yonah should be taught a lesson. He would be shown that wherever a person wishes to flee from the Divine Presence, in that very same place he will be trapped so completely that he is unable to move from it in any way. Therefore, it says (verse 1) that *Hashem summoned a big fish to swallow Yonah* — a perfect demonstration of the principle that He wanted to teach. Yonah would be caught in the ultimate trap, locked up and unable to move inside the bowels of the fish, [at the bottom of the same sea where he had tried to flee]. [This answers Question 1.]

Answer to
Question 1

He also decreed that Yonah should be afflicted with various types of suffering as atonement for his act of fleeing, instead of having to suffer for this sin in Gehinnom. Thus, before being swallowed by the fish, Hashem made the breakers and waves of the sea crash down upon him (as stated in verse 4). This is why verse 1 states “*Hashem summoned a big fish to swallow Yonah*” instead of “and it swallowed Yonah.” At this point God merely summoned and prepared the fish that would swallow Yonah. It would not actually occur, however, until after he received his other punishments.⁶ [This answers Question 2.]

Answer to
Question 2

The verse then hints to us that Yonah did not change after he was swallowed by the fish; his body did not decompose in the fish’s digestive juices, nor did he suffocate. By repeating the word “Yonah” (“... *to swallow Yonah. Yonah remained in the bowels of the fish*”), the verse is telling us that he remained the same as he was before. He was not harmed even though he remained there *for three days and three nights*. Hashem concealed him there and kept him alive in order to show him how He controls nature, overturning its laws [whenever He desires]. [This answers Question 3.]

Answer to
Question 3

While Yonah was there, he could not bring himself to pray

6. See verses 4–11.

to Hashem since he felt weighed down by guilt. He felt that Hashem wanted to show him that wherever a person goes [to escape], that is where he will end up being trapped. This was why he had ended up inside the fish, where he was sure he was destined to die as a punishment for his sin. He thought that the only reason Hashem was keeping him alive for the moment was to make him realize that he had sinned. He did not attempt to speak to Hashem, for He was sure that God was angry with him. So he sat there, silently accepting his fate. [This answers Question 4.]

Answer to
Question 4

[To show him that he was wrong about Hashem continuing to be angry with him,] Hashem transferred Yonah from inside the male fish to another, female fish. Now that he had received his punishment and seen what happens when a person tries to escape from Hashem, it was time for God to reward him for the good intentions he had had (in not wanting to bring blame upon the Jewish people). By putting him into the second fish, Hashem was indicating to Yonah how much He in fact wanted him to speak to Him and to renew their connection. He was telling Yonah, “You tried to flee because you did not want Me to speak with you, but I would really like you to speak with Me. You will realize that since you have now been punished for what you did, you will receive your reward for your good intentions and you will feel My love for you.” He put him inside a female fish full of thousands of tiny fish, which led Yonah to conclude: “If Hashem had wanted me to die inside a fish and was only keeping me alive to make me see the error of my ways, why did He put me into this second fish, where I would be so hemmed in? What difference does this extra bit of suffering make if I am anyway destined to die in the sea? Does the Angel of Death care whether I am inside one fish or another? It must be that Hashem really wants me to live because I have already received my punishment. He must have brought me into this constricted space because He wants me to pray to Him to release me from my

suffering.” So *Yonah* prayed to Hashem **his God** from the bowels of the (female) fish. [This answers Question 5.]⁷

Answer to
Question 5

The content of Yonah’s prayer is not recorded in our text, but it is brought down in the Midrash.⁸ It was after he finished praying that he said, “*I called out to Hashem from my suffering.*” By this he meant as follows: “It is *from my suffering* here in this fish that I understood what Hashem wanted and *I called out to Hashem.*”⁹ [This answers Question 6.]

Answer to
Question 6

We asked above (Question 7) why Yonah basically seems to repeat himself by adding, “*I cried out from the belly of the underworld.*” We also asked (Question 8) how Yonah could say first, “*He answered me,*” and only after that, “*You heard my voice.*” We will now answer these questions. Yonah is telling us here that even before he had begun to pray, Hashem answered him — in the sense that He had already decided to accept his [as yet unstated] request. Yet He did not release him from the fish immediately. He waited until Yonah had finished his lengthy prayers and supplications. Why did He wait? To explain this, we may offer the following analogy: Two friends of the king come to request something of him. As soon as they present themselves, the king already knows what each of them will ask for, and has decided to fulfill their requests. To one of them he says, “I know what you want to ask me, and I have already agreed to grant your request; there is no need for you to tell me about it.” With the second friend, even though the king has already decided to grant his request, he waits until

7. To explain: The verse emphasizes here that Yonah prayed to Hashem his God because it was at this point that Yonah realized that Hashem was still with him and wanted to save him.

8. See *Yalkut Shimoni* 550 where it records that Yonah prayed as follows: “Master of the worlds ... where can I escape your Presence? If I go up to the heavens You are there ... You are the King over all kingdoms... the actions of all people are revealed before You...” See there further for the full text of Yonah’s prayer.

9. Thus, the verse simply records why Yonah decided only at this point that he should pray to Hashem.

Chapter 2

(4) “You cast me into the depths, into the heart of the seas, and a river surrounded me. All Your breakers and waves swept over me.”

(5) I said [to myself], “I have been banished from before Your eyes, but I will once again gaze upon the palace of Your holiness.

(6) “Water enveloped me up to my soul, the depths surrounded me; reeds enclosed my head.”

he has completely finished explaining every last detail of what he needs. Which of the two does the king evidently love most? Surely it is the second one, since the king did not stop him from expressing his request and instead listened patiently and with affection to his heartfelt pleas, treasuring each word that he heard from his dear friend. The very fact that he waited to hear his friend’s request, even though he already knew it and agreed to fulfill it, shows the king’s affection toward him.

We also explained this idea in our commentary to the verse from *Sefer Yeshayahu*, “*It shall be that before they call out and I [Hashem] will answer; they are still speaking and I will listen.*”¹⁰ Hashem was saying, “Before they call out, I have already decided to fulfill their request. Nevertheless, I will not stop them speaking to Me. While *they are still speaking*, I will listen to them since their words are precious to Me.” Yonah was saying the same thing here: “*I called out to Hashem from my suffering and He answered me [even before I called out. Nevertheless,] I cried out from the belly of the underworld; You heard my voice.* You did not stop listening to my voice [as I beseeched You] from inside the fish.”¹¹ [This answers Questions 7¹² and 8.]

Answer to
Questions
7 and 8

10. *Yeshayahu* 65:24.

11. The Alshich adds that the belly of the fish is compared to *the underworld* (i.e., Gehinnom) because it was a hot and stifling environment.

12. In the first clause (“*I called out ... from my suffering*”) Yonah describes how he