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Noach: Regret from Noach to Yonah Shoshana Jakobovits, Class of 2026

When the Gemara tells us of the famous debates between the houses of Hillel and Shamai, it mentions this particularly harrowing question:

For two and a half years, Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed. These say: It would have been preferable had man not been created than to have been created. And those said: It is preferable for man to have been created than had he not been created. ([Bavli Eruvin 13b](#))

Would it have been better had mankind never been created? The Gemara concludes that it would have, indeed! This terrifying contemplation, the possibility of man having not been created, finds an echo in *parshat* Noach:

And YKVK regretted having made man on earth, and YKVK's heart was saddened. ([Bereishit 6:6](#))

God, with great sadness, regrets the creation of man. What a terrible realization to come to! Just a week ago, we read the most fabulous creation narratives. We read of God's repeated exclamations "*that this was good,*" and all the grandeur and optimism of Bereishit seems to come crashing down in this painful concession: It would have been better had man not been created.

However the story of Noach, like almost every other story in Tanakh, does not stand on its own. When Noach sends the dove (*yonah*) off to see whether the flood has subsided, not only does the dove take flight off the ark, but her wings also carry her off the pages of Chumash, across the Torah, to finally land on the pages of the Navi, in the book of Yonah.

In fact, the story of Yonah and that of Noach have some striking similarities. In both narratives, God plans tremendous destruction of people and animals due to humans behaving with lawlessness. In both cases, life-threatening waters are whipped up and brought back to calm by a "*ruach*" (wind) from God. After the maritime episodes,

plant-themed sections follow, a vine for Noach and a *kikayon* for Yonah. And there are many more thematic and linguistic echoes between Noach and Yonah, inviting us to read these two stories alongside one another and note their differences.

One parallel I find striking is the following: Towards the end of Yonah's story, after Nineveh's inhabitants do *teshuva*, God decides against destroying the city along with its entire population after all. The words used in the book of Yonah are:

And God regretted the punishment that had been planned for them, and did not carry it out. ([Yonah 3:10](#))

The language is very similar to the verse in Parashat Noach. Both use the verb form *vayinachem* (“[God] regretted”). Except in the book of Yonah, God does not regret creating mankind, but quite the opposite: God regrets the decision of destroying humans. The Navi uses the same word as was used in Noach to describe the regret of man's creation—this time though, it describes the regret of having planned to destroy man.

The story of the flood in Noach leaves us with a distressing feeling: The only thing standing between us and the destruction of the world is a divine promise symbolized in the fragile droplets of a rainbow, suspended in thin air. However, when the question of destruction of entire human populations on account of their wrongdoings are retold in the book of Yonah, God's words are unequivocal:

Then YKVK said: “You cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. And should not I care about Nineveh, that great city [...]” ([Yonah 4:10-11](#))

In other words, if Yonah finds himself caring about the death of a plant, which he has neither tended to nor grown, he should know how much God must care for a big city full of God's creatures. This comparison implies that God's mercy on the city of Nineveh is due (at least in part) to God having created, grown, cared for its inhabitants.

The central narrative of this week's *parsha*, the story of Noach and his ark, might come as a tremendous disappointment after the grandeur of the creation we read last week. How could God regret creating mankind and destroy it save for Noach's family, just a mere six chapters after bringing humans to the world? How are we meant to pursue our relationship with God after we learn of God's regret for having created us?

Perhaps we can read the book of Yonah as a partial answer to this question. Yes, it is true, in Noach's time (only ten generations after the creation of the world), wiping out nearly all of mankind was a viable option for God. But by the time we get to Yonah's generation, God's relationship to humanity has grown and matured. We are no longer to God just like the ephemeral *kikayon*. Rather, God has invested in us, grown us, tended to us.

In the book of Yonah, there is no need for a divine promise for destruction to be averted. The reason for God not to rain down punishment lies not so much in the behavior of humans or in divine promises to be kept, but rather in the nature of God's relationship to humanity: the care God has for us, from having created us, grown us, tended to us for generations and generations is enough.

And no prophet, not even Yonah will make God change God's mind.

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