

A Speculative Note on the Torah Reading for Fast Days

By: BEN ZION KATZ

Introduction

The Torah reading for fast days (with the exception of Yom Kippur and the morning of Tisha B'Av) is Exodus 32:11–14 followed by Exodus 34:1–10. It is the only example of a non-contiguous reading from the Torah.¹ This brief essay will propose a solution as to why the Rabbis instituted this practice.

The Book of Jonah

The book of Jonah (itself read at the afternoon service of Yom Kippur) tells the famous story of the reluctant prophet and the repentance and forgiveness of the city of Nineveh. It is a fitting reading for Yom Kippur—the Day of Atonement—for if God can forgive a pagan city that repents, how much more so will God forgive us Jews if we repent.

Towards the end of chapter 3, after the King of Nineveh himself dons sackcloth (verse 6), he instructs the people (and livestock!) to repent as well, by fasting and donning sackcloth (verse 7). For “Who knows [the king continues], but that God may turn and relent? He may turn back from His wrath, so that we do not perish” (verse 9²). The chapter then

¹ Excepting of course, *maftir* readings, which in themselves are contiguous but are not contiguous with other material read the same day, either the normal weekly portion on most Sabbaths, or the Torah section pertinent to that day in the case of a festival.

² All translations are from the New Jewish Publication Society version (1985).

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concludes, “God saw what they did, how they were turning back from their evil ways. And God renounced the punishment which He had planned to bring upon them, and did not carry it out.”

Chapter 4 opens with Jonah very angry. He prays to God saying, “O Lord! ... 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...” (verse 2).

The attentive reader will notice that the words in Jonah 3:9: “*veshav ma-charon apo*, and turn back from His wrath” are very similar to the words of Exodus 32:12, when Moses prays for the Israelites after the sin of the golden calf, saying: “*shuv ma-charon apecha*, turn from your blazing anger,”³ while the words “*Vayenachem ha-Elokim al ha-raah asher diber la-asot la-bem*, And God renounced the punishment which He had planned to bring upon them” in Jonah 3:10 are very similar to what is found in Exodus 32:14: “*Vayenachem Hashem al ha-raah asher diber la-asot le-amo*, And the Lord renounced the punishment He had planned to bring upon His people.”⁴ Furthermore, in chapter 4, verse 2, Jonah is invoking God’s known merciful nature (“*kayl chanun verachum erech apayim verav chesed...*, a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness” by abridging His attributes as they are fully delineated in Exodus 34:6: “*kayl rachum vechanun, erech apayim verav chesed...*”).

Thus, the book of Jonah juxtaposes two close paraphrases from the book of Exodus to show that God’s nature is forgiving. It seems to me (*lefi aniyat daati*) that *chazal* patterned the Torah reading for fast days after the book of Jonah, the ultimate paradigm of repentance and forgiveness. Of course, the Rabbis would not choose the Exodus portions 32:11–14 and 34:1–10 to be read on Yom Kippur at *shacharit* because the Torah has a Yom Kippur ritual (Leviticus 16) which is more appropriate. As to the Yom Kippur *minchah* Torah reading, which is more difficult to rationalize (why read about forbidden sexual union on Yom Kippur afternoon?),⁵ as long as one is already reading Jonah for the *haftarah*, it was probably unnecessary to read a Torah portion patterned after that *haftarah*.

³ The Hebrew is more similar than the English translations attest, for NJPS translates the same expression “*charon af*” as “wrath” in the first instance and “blazing anger” in the second instance.

⁴ The major difference between the Jonah and Exodus texts are to whom the punishment is referring (the Israelites in the Exodus passage and the Ninevites in the Jonah passage).

⁵ See for example the discussion in *Yom Kippur Machazor with Commentary Adapted from the Teachings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, edited by A. Lustiger and M. Taubes, (NY: K’hal Publishing, 2006), pp. 686–8.

It should also not escape notice that the juxtaposition of the passages in Jonah may be used as an argument against the Documentary Hypothesis. Exodus 32:11–14 is attributed to E while Exodus 34:1–10 is attributed to J for the most part.⁶ The fact that the book of Jonah, in contiguous passages, refers to closely related sections of the Torah from supposedly different “sources” shows that these sections were already in the Torah at the time Jonah was written. Y Kaufman has argued (persuasively to my mind⁷) that Jonah could not have been written after Assyria (whose capital was Nineveh) had already exiled the Northern Kingdom in 722 BCE; this also jibes with the mention of Jonah in II Kings 14:25 during the reign of Yerovam II (son of Yoash), who reigned from 784–744 BCE.⁸ This predates the era at which most scholars believe “J” and “E” were edited together.⁹ ❧

⁶ See for example RE Friedman *The Bible with Sources Revealed: A New View Into the Five Books of Moses* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2003), pp. 173-4 and 177-8.

⁷ *The Religion of Israel: from its beginnings to the Babylonian exile*, translated and abridged by Moshe Greenberg, (NY: Schocken, 1960, 1972), pp. 282–6.

⁸ For slightly different dating of Yerovam II see M Cogan and H Tadmor, II Kings, *Anchor Bible*, 1988, p. 341.

⁹ See, e.g., Friedman, *op. cit.*, p. 4.