

## **JONAH -YOM KIPPUR, TAOS 2018**

It ain't necessarily so

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The things that you're liable to read in the bible

It ain't necessarily (3) so!

Oh, Jonah he lived in a whale...

We have often treated the story of Jonah, who spent three days in the belly of a whale, as children's fable, a biblical story of a minor prophet that hardly merits our attention.

It ain't necessarily so!

In fact, the Book of Jonah is the last reading, the final word of all of the Torah and Haftorah readings of the High Holy Day cycle. It really is meant to be read on Yom Kippur afternoon, when you are so drowsy and hungry that perhaps the rabbis will do anything to get your attention! But in truth, the story of Jonah contains the essence of the message of Yom Kippur: That there is a God of Mercy who hears and accepts our repentance, and just as the Holy One is compassionate to all God's creatures, so we too must open our hearts in compassion and love.

The anti-hero of the story is Jonah, a prophet with an attitude problem.

**And the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim judgment upon it; for their wickedness has come before Me. Jonah, however, started out to flee to Tarshish from the LORD's service. He found a ship going to Tarshish, paid the fare and went aboard to sail with the others, away from the service of the LORD.**

God gives a direct order, and Jonah, a well-known if not quite successful prophet in Jerusalem, completely disobeys. It is as if he is told to go to Las Vegas, (NV) but heads directly to Hawaii. It is not that Jonah is afraid that the people of Nineveh will ignore him, but quite the opposite. What if the Assyrians of Nineveh, sworn enemies of the nation of Israel, repent, while the Jews of Jerusalem do not?

Jonah is most concerned about spin. Will obeying to God's word make him look bad? Jonah has already prophesied the downfall of Nineveh because they will not repent and turn from their evil ways, and their repentance, he fears, will make him look like a failed prophet. It's all about him. Rather than face humiliation, Jonah runs away. He goes to the port of Jaffa, purchases all of the seats on the passenger boat, and immediately sets sail.

Our Yom Kippur reading is set Eighth Century BCE, but could be the Middle East today. What if a modern day 'prophet-statesman' who had been prophesizing the doom of any peace in the Middle East were to go to Assad and declare that if he did not repent his violent and destructive ways, the entire country would be annihilated by God's wrath. What if, on the following day, Assad were to declare "Praised be to Allah" and order all missiles destroyed, and ask the Russians and Iranians to go home, offering peace with Israel. Or if a 'prophet' of Israel were to go to Abbas (much like a group from Peace Now did last month) and offer a Federated Partnership between Israel, Jordan and Palestine if the Palestinians would repent- no suicide bombers, no right of return- and Abbas accepted! Where would that leave the current Israeli government, who have made it clear that peace is not possible at this moment? The prophet surely does not want to make Israel look bad. Better to run to Tarshish, which was probably an 8<sup>th</sup> century beach resort off the coast of Sicily.

**But the LORD cast a mighty wind upon the sea, and such a great tempest came upon the sea that the ship was in danger of breaking up.**

**In their fright, the sailors cried out, each to his own god; and they flung the ship's cargo overboard to make it lighter for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the vessel where he lay down and fell asleep.**

Sleep. How often have I heard the call, know what I am supposed to do, but instead I have gone to sleep. Perhaps it is a family member who needs help, or a person in my community that would greatly benefit from my attention, but I turn away, sinking into the sleep of a somnolent existence.

Deep down, in “the hold of our own vessel”, our inner being, we know who we are, and what we are here to do, but more often than not we shut our ears, close our eyes, or even buy a ticket in the opposite direction. Who am I to... improve New Mexico education? Build a Jewish community in Taos? Call out anti-Semitism? Call out sexual abuse? Mitigate global warming? There might be a place in us that knows our special strengths and abilities, but we don't quite believe in them. Or, we are afraid to let others know how powerful we really are. It's what the renowned therapist Dr. Abraham Maslow literally called “The Jonah Syndrome”. In the words of the late Nelson Mandela:

*Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate, Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure .It is our light, not our darkness that frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to?*

Jonah knows who he is, the power that God has bestowed upon him, and the consequences of fleeing from the task. He can see that

all around him the sea is calm, but that his boat is pursued by a relentless storm. It's personal.

**The captain went over to him and cried out, “How can you be sleeping so soundly! Up, call upon your god! Perhaps the god will be kind to us and we will not perish.” The men said to one another, “Let us cast lots and find out on whose account this misfortune has come upon us.” They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. They said to him, “Tell us, you who have brought this misfortune upon us, what is your business? Where have you come from? What is your country, and of what people are you?” “I am a Hebrew,” he replied. “I worship the Lord, the God of Heaven, who made both sea and land.”**

**The men were greatly terrified, and they asked him, “What have you done?” And when the men learned that he was fleeing from the service of the Lord—for so he told them—they said to him, “What must we do to you to make the sea calm around us?” For the sea was growing more and more stormy. He answered, “Heave me overboard, and the sea will calm down for you; for I know that this terrible storm came upon you on my account.”**

Despite Jonah's confession, the sailors do not want to toss Jonah overboard, even though his actions lead to their destruction. They try to row to shore, but to no avail. Unlike Jonah, the non-Jewish sailors immediately recognize the power of the God of the Jews.

**Then they cried, “Oh, please, LORD, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not hold us guilty of killing an innocent person! For You, O LORD, by your will, have brought this about.” And they heaved Jonah overboard, and the sea stopped raging.**

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We all know the next part of the story:

**The LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah; and Jonah remained in the fish's belly three days and three nights.**

God is clearly in charge of all creatures, and summons seas and serpents at will. Jonah, swallowed into the depths of the deep, finally prays to his God.

**Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish. I thought I was driven away Out of Your sight: Would I ever gaze again Upon Your holy Temple? But I, with loud thanksgiving, Will sacrifice to You; What I have vowed I will perform. Deliverance is the LORD's!**

Jonah, in his fear and pain promises “loud thanksgiving” and offers vows of sacrifice, but does not offer to repent and change his ways. “The Lord” is only vaguely impressed by Jonah’s eloquence.

**The LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon dry land...**leaving Jonah to lie in a pile of fish vomit, on a shore far, far from home.

Who says God doesn't have a sense of humor?

God decides to give Jonah a second chance to do God's will, and so while Jonah is lying there with piles of smelly fish guts sticking to him, God comes to talk.

**“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it what I tell you.”**

Jonah reluctantly gathers up his skirts and makes his way inland.

When he reaches the far outskirts of Nineveh, a huge metropolis that takes three days to cross, Jonah stops at the border and mumbles **“Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be**

**overthrown!”** There is no big declaration in the Nineveh city square, just one sentence of a mumbled prophesy. “I did it”, thinks Jonah. “It will never happen. Now lets go home.”

But then, the miraculous does happen. God’s word travels quickly through the kingdom, and the Ninevites, those sworn enemies of the Israelites, completely repent.

**The people of Nineveh believed God. The King proclaimed a fast, and great and small alike put on sackcloth .And he had the word cried through Nineveh: “By decree of the king and his nobles: No man or beast—of flock or herd—shall taste anything! They shall be covered with sackcloth—man and beast—and shall cry mightily to God.**

The people of Nineveh do not necessarily believe in God, but BELIEVE God, unlike the recalcitrant Israelites. The repentance of these non-Jews becomes the model for our Yom Kippur. They do not offer vows and sacrifices, but mourn and change their ways. The rabbis tell us that their sin was not idolatry, but theft and corruption, and that each one sought out his neighbor, returned what was stolen, and asked for forgiveness. Even the beasts repent- I always see the cattle and sheep in little sackcloth hoods and booties- for the universalist God of Jonah is the God of all creatures. Their repentance is accepted.

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

Jonah is devastated.

Jonah, the most successful prophet in the bible-he is the only prophet who lives to see his prophesy fulfilled, is a complete failure as a human being.

**Jonah prayed to the LORD, saying, “O LORD! Isn’t this just what I said when I was still in my own country? I knew it! 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, renouncing punishment.**

Jonah, whose name is Jonah ben Amittai, son of Truth, is wrapped in self-righteousness. Why have mercy on the enemies of Israel? How can you forgive the Ninevites without meting out just punishment for their sins? How can you just accept their repentance and offer forgiveness overnight- it isn’t fair!

Adonai, Adonai, el Rachum V’Chanun-God, forgive us, we pray over and over on this Yom Kippur. You are a compassionate and gracious God-erech apayim v’rav chesed v’emet-slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment. We beg for kindness and compassion for ourselves, but what about forgiveness for those who have harmed us? Do we accept an apology but still hope to see harsh punishment? Do we judge others on the side of strict justice, even if they have repented and confessed? The overcrowding of our prison system says a great deal about our need to punish others.

We ask God to move, in these last Yom Kippur hours, from the Throne of Justice to the Throne of Mercy. We beg God to accept our tshuvah, and to turn to us, even if we are still imperfect. Return to Me, God says, and I will return to you. (Malachi 3:7)  
“V’Yomer Adonai, salachti k’davercha” And God says, I have forgiven you according to your words. No further punishment need be applied.

Jonah is disgusted.

**“Please, LORD, take my life, for I would rather die than live.”**

And in a somewhat sarcastic tone, God replies, **“Really, Jonah, are you that deeply grieved?”**

**Now Jonah had left the city and found a place east of the city. He made a booth there and sat under it in the shade, until he should see what happened to the city.**

Jonah is utterly devoid of empathy for anyone other than himself. God sees Jonah, sulking in self-righteous anger on a hilltop, and makes one last effort to teach his judgemental prophet the meaning of empathy and compassion.

**The LORD God provided a kikayon plant(a gourd) which grew up over Jonah, to provide shade for his head and save him from discomfort. Jonah was very happy about the plant.**

Jonah, whose heart is not moved by to the suffering of the sailors on the boat, nor the heartfelt repentance of the citizens of Nineveh, is moved by love for a plant.

**But the next day at dawn God provided a worm, which attacked the plant so that it withered. And when the sun rose, God provided a sultry east wind; the sun beat down on Jonah’s head, and he became faint. He begged for death, saying, “I would rather die than live.”**

**Then God said to Jonah, “Are you so deeply grieved about the plant?” “Yes,” he replied, “so deeply that I want to die.**

**Then the LORD 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, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons**

**who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well?”**

On this Yom Kippur, should we not care about the people of the Carolinas, whose homes have been devastated by flood? And all those beasts- the wild animals of the forest, the cattle, their pets now swirling in a horrendous wash of water?

Should we not care about the immigrant children separated from their parents at our own borders? Should we not care about the millions of refugees roaming the planet worldwide, motivated by famine or war to seek better lives? Should we not care about the children of the Syrians, our enemies, as they face a final brutal battle for survival in the coming days? What about the Palestinians whose homes are destroyed, or the Israeli schoolchildren of Sederot constantly bombarded by Hamas? And what about the children of Gaza **that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well?”**

Adonai Adonai, El Rachum V'chanun, erech apayim v'rav  
CHESED- judge us from your seat of mercy and compassion on this Yom Kippur day, and help us, in Your image, to reach out in compassion and mercy to all who inhabit our earth.