

## **Rabbi's Column**

### **This is the Rabbi's Second Kol Nidre Sermon**

The Book of Jonah is filled with characters who provide opposition to Jonah as a way for him to refine his own self-understanding. The sailors and the people of Nineveh represent a different religious worldview from Jonah's, one riddled with fear and uncertainty regarding the higher forces that guide their polymorphic universe. Jonah seemed to know the way God worked, which is why he is believed when he says something about what God wants to happen.

Jonah seems to make the sailors into leaders so that he could continue to resist those in positions of authority: God, the captain of the ship, and these officers. As officers of the ship, or even as plain sailors, it turns out that by running away Jonah had imperiled simple and innocent men who followed directions, just as he himself should have. It would have seemed that Jonah's repentance should be what he focused on as the storm got stronger. However, teshuvah demands personal accountability and transformation - so a lottery can seem like an intense psychological relief.

Jonah was right in why the storm had shown up, but he was also wrong. He knew that God was after him but he thought that God wished him dead. Jonah persisted in his stubborn and misguided belief that he knew God's ways and, therefore, his own ways remained unchanged throughout. His prayer was not one of contrition but one of basic thanksgiving. Jonah did not undertake any atonement in action or in thought.

Sometimes "maybe" is a word we toss into the ether on the very rare and random chance that something totally out of the ordinary will happen. This is the "maybe" of a lottery ticket, the slim and mathematically unlikely chance of something audacious and exceptional taking place. But sometimes "maybe" is a word that helps us create new possibilities and move in new directions, preparing ourselves for a transformation that we can anticipate but cannot guarantee, a more certain uncertainty. This is the "maybe" of Nineveh, a "maybe" that requires change, contrition, and action to create a new type of existence, one anticipated but not guaranteed.

Jonah was convinced that he knew exactly how God worked and arrogantly implied that they did not, so he swam or walked away from the possibility of redemption, for himself or anyone else. But his surety was not at all what God wanted. It appears that God instead wanted Jonah to question his own

sense of certainty, his vehement understanding of the way that God works in the world.

So Jonah is now in the water and gets swallowed. To contemplate Jonah's great fish is also to situate it within its ancient Near Eastern context. Dagon, a popular Semitic fish-god among the Philistines, was regarded as the head of its pantheon of gods and worshipped along the eastern Mediterranean coast. God's sending a fish to save and move the prophet suggests that even such a large and frightening creature as the great fish – one that was worshipped as a manifestation of a pagan god – was nothing more than a tool in the much more powerful armament of the Israelite God. This should not have been a big surprise. After all, when the Ark of the Tablets spent some time in the area where Dagon was worshipped, all that remained of this god after the Israelite God amputated his arms and decapitated him was the shape of a fish.

Those who pay too much attention to the fish's presence often ignore the significance of the story in an attempt to disprove its historicity. The fish was not an accidental prop in this story but an intentional vehicle for transformation.

The Midrash relates that each verse of the prayer corresponds to a place in the water that Jonah traveled to inside the fish. So he was aware

of his surroundings, and even of the fish's surroundings. Yet the fish was in one sense more in tune with the surroundings than Jonah was. God merely had to command the great fish, and it rushed to Jonah's service. But a similar command met its human objection in Jonah, a prophet constrained by justice who lacked the mercy that is a requisite of a truly great prophet.

I read a lot. Some books refuse to communicate any more than the star of the book knows, and that is the case here. There is a lot more that we do not know about what goes on surrounding Jonah than the little bit we are aware of, which makes certain that we continue to travel with Jonah in the fog of uncertainty. For example, we do not know if it is intentional that Nineveh is big enough to take three days to walk through it and that Jonah spends three days inside the big fish. Three days appears to be both a short and long time in the ancient biblical world for news of enemy whereabouts or behavior to make itself manifest. This amount of time enables learning and the passage of information to become digestible and an initial reaction to have time to percolate and form; it also creates the space for physical and spiritual preparation to face a crisis ahead.

On day one we are thrown into crisis, a change that we confront or deny with irritation. By day three, we will hopefully confront the change and prepare for it. The third day reminds us that it is not only the waiting that

matters. It also matters what we do as we are preparing for the wait to be over.

It was an act of prayer that finally moved Jonah from a prophet adrift to a prophet with newfound direction, with a renewed commitment to becoming the leader God expected him to be. What happened to Jonah as he prayed? Jonah's prayer created the possibility of achieving a stated task rather than being the platform for a different relationship with God. While this was not a small accomplishment for a prophet so damaged by his flight, it was ultimately not enough to help him even execute the task without backing down. Jonah's prayer was one of thanksgiving; it was decidedly not one of atonement. Jonah does not take this opportunity to begin to make a necessary change.

In one fashion Jonah's actions seem self-destructive. He runs from God, which is kind of impossible; he tries to have the water swallow him up, and then he keeps missing the point God is trying to make, declaring that it would be better if God just took him out of the world. As I think of it (and this is not from Dr. Brown's work, I am pretty sure) if Javert were suicide averse, this would be his plea with God after experiencing the reality of Valjean.

Jonah's prayer in the fish was his statement of transformation, knowing that if he really died, he would miss what was really important to him. He would never see the Temple in its glory. Lost would be pilgrimages and sacrifices, communal prayer and personal confessions. But the loss that would be greatest for this prophet was the intimate relationship he enjoyed with God, a relationship that collapsed when he ran away from his duty. The Temple, in this framework, was the place of ultimate stability, where suddenly Jonah found himself in his imagination when he was at his greatest point of fragility, dreaming of a building made of heavy stone sitting atop a mountain, far from the sea.

Despite the focus Jonah has on the Temple, God does not directly respond. God does talk to Jonah in chapter 4, but not here. The reality of the Temple is not going to get the point across that God is trying to make.

To God, repentance overshadowed and diminished evil. To Jonah, repentance itself was an evil. The Midrash states: He [Jonah] was sent to Jerusalem to prophesy destruction; when they repented, God had mercy and repented of the evil and did not destroy it, and they called him a false prophet. The third time [Jonah was called], he was sent to Nineveh to cry its destruction. Jonah thought to himself: I know that the gentiles are near

repentance and they will indeed repent ... and not only will Israel call me a false prophet, but even pagan worshippers will call me a false prophet.

A later commentator, Ms. Tribble states that from the Ninevites' perspective the prophecy offers hope, though not the guarantee, of repentance human and divine. From God's perspective their repentance overturns divine evil to bring deliverance. From Jonah's perspective, the divine deliverance overturns his prophecy to discredit it.

How could he follow a God who changed His course and direction – His mind, if you will? Nineveh was prepared to change. God was prepared to change. Jonah was not prepared to change. Jonah was disappointed in the God he remembered, a God who was more merciful than just. If God did not represent truth, then the son of truth could not live.

God had to explain forcefully to Jonah that there can be no piety without love, no truth without mercy, and, most importantly, that human beings will never have a vast enough perspective and context to know when to apply justice and when to offer compassion.

Jonah should have figured this out from all the strange things he experienced. The animals of chapter 3 behave strangely. Strange climatic changes bookend the chapters, from the storm that seems to identify Jonah as the culprit to a hot, easterly wind that burns with such intensity that it

prompts Jonah to beg God to be released from life itself. The fish that saved Jonah, temporarily trapping him and then spitting him out in exactly the right location to make good on his mission, occupies no more a significant place in the story's unraveling than the small worm that consumed Jonah's special tree.

God was not asking Jonah why he felt happy and then subsequently saddened by the existence and destruction of a tree that provided shade. God simply wanted him to state his emotions and validate them, enabling God to highlight Jonah's rigidity when it came to others and his fluidity of feeling when it came to the mercy extended to him. When nature – the storm, the wind, the fish, the cattle, the worm, the tree – consistently behaved against their nature, Jonah should have realized that as a prophet he was behaving against his destiny.

Animals, large and small, are not only part of Jonah's experience here but an essential part of the story for the city of Nineveh. Human beings may fast and dress in sackcloth and yet not be inspired to change at all. But human beings who lack compassion for each other may still have compassion for their animals, especially when they witness them in a state of suffering.

We might even focus more on the people than the animals, if it were not for the last verse. Animals are included in those who do not know the difference between their hands. Animals do not have right or left hands, and if they did, they would not know that they did. This forces us to focus not on what the humans or animals are capable or incapable of doing but on God's vast mercies that extend to creatures that are not conduits for God's plan. They are sentient beings and they exist, and this was enough of a reason to save them.

I could end here, but there are several other important final points to learn from the Book of Jonah.

Nature bent itself to God's will throughout the Book of Jonah but the prophet did not. Nature, like most human beings in the Book of Jonah, changed. The sailors changed. The king changed. The king's subjects changed. God changed. Cattle changed. But Jonah did not change.

God cared about Nineveh regardless of its current moral state, it would appear, because these were inhabitants who did not yet know their right from their left hands, as if their ignorance itself was endearing.

The message to Jonah is therefore more subtle: care about your tree and care about My people not because it or they give you something you need but purely because I created them and asked you to serve them.

God's compassion reigns and goes far beyond our detailed lists of wrongdoing.

Locked into the particularistic concerns of his own nation, Jonah found no reasonable justification for his mission. His interest in service was and remained within the thin geographic sliver of the Land of Israel alone. If a prophet is the human embodiment of God's desires for the known world, then the prophet too must have boundless love for humanity.

As mentioned earlier, the word *gadol*, appears fourteen times in the Book of Jonah, signaling to its readers how much larger the world was to a prophet cowed by its vastness and overwhelmed by his smallness. He thought that being overwhelmed justified giving up God's plans for him. But we are not free agents to relinquish God's plans for us. God told Jonah this through nature, through entrapment, through the art of the well-positioned question. Everything pointed in one direction – a momentum toward Nineveh was also a push to actualization of the greatness within Jonah that he consistently refused to acknowledge.

The path to achieving greatness is littered with dangers, chief of which is the fear of failure that can paralyze all self-actualization. We must all live with the questions that most dog our human existence. And we must ask them again and again and not feel that we are entitled to clarity.

So every year we contemplate an ancient Hebrew prophet who tried to say goodbye and good riddance to greatness and a God who would not let him do so. We stand at attention on this holiest day of the year, with only a few hours remaining, and ask ourselves why we too run from greatness. Turn around, a little voice of holiness whispers. Turn around now and step into your life fully and wholly. Embrace the possibility of greatness before this year's gates shut tight. All awaits.