

Rabbi's Column

This is the Rabbi's Kol Nidre Sermon

The entire set of sermonettes tonight will be based on quotations from “Jonah: The Reluctant Prophet” by Dr. Erica Brown. We read the book of Jonah on Yom Kippur afternoon, so even when we take the time needed to look at the story in some detail, we are often more focused on the Break Fast yet to come than on the text being studied. Even with the extra time I am taking tonight, I am only touching on a small percentage of the quotations I lifted directly from her book. Dr. Brown indicates that all of the ideas contained in her book are based on commentary, some of it extending back 2000 years.

You might think that something called the Book of Jonah would be about Jonah. When it comes right down to it, however, we learn very little about Jonah as a person, and much more about God. From Genesis we know that God is responsible for the existence of plants and animals as well as people, and that God wants us to take care of the plants and animals. The Book of Jonah makes it clear that God continues to make use of plants and animals to teach humans important lessons, and that God cares for all the tools God makes use of.

Jonah’s personal theological crisis, which I will touch on a bit more later on, will become the platform upon which God models divine compassion. God urges Jonah to become more godly, more like his Creator. God recruits the rest of nature to fight Jonah’s human nature so surely, knowing Jonah’s story, we can all overcome the barriers we find that keep us from exhibiting some of God’s compassion. A couple of these barriers are the niggling resistance to being different than we are and the narcissistic pull that keeps our worlds small and limited. God’s efforts to expand Jonah’s horizons include God’s rescuing Jonah from the very end of the known world, bringing him from the brink of death to continue his life of purpose and service.

This is not a lesson unique to Jonah. After all, Joseph, Judah and Tamar, Ruth and Naomi all suffered one loss after another and yet continued to live and help fulfill God’s purpose for creation. Jonah could have done the same – and then the book would have been powerful in a different way.

Despite being a comparatively short book, (only 4 chapters) there is a lot of information packed into it. Some of the information is, unfortunately, lost in translation. Translations often use synonyms to add sophistication to biblical verses but they can compromise the simplicity and value of a word written again and again. There are key words that appear several times in this book of only forty-eight verses – seventeen in the first chapter, ten in the middle two chapters, and eleven in the last.

Just to cite one example of a word that repeats often – the word Gadol in its various forms (meaning big, great, older, large – to name a few possibilities) appears fourteen times. It is used as an adjective for both the target city of Nineveh and the fish used to save Jonah. Nature, including the nature of cities, is oversized and daunting.

When the TaNaKH was finalized, there was never a question as to whether or not the Book of Jonah should be included. Including the story of a rebellious prophet is not enough to keep it on the sidelines. We are all rebellious at times, and sometimes our rebellion takes the form of giving up and deciding that what God has in mind for us is just too much. We may actually give

up on ourselves. God, however, does not give up on us. That is just one of the many lessons contained in the Book of Jonah.

The Book begins with God commanding Jonah, and then Jonah running away. Let us listen as some of our commentators talk about why he did it:

Rashi states that poor Jonah sought out Tarshish specifically because he wanted to leave the Land of Israel, naively believing that if he left his homeland, God's presence could not rest upon him.

The Mechilta claims that Jonah disobeyed God, his Father, to protect the dignity of the Israelites who would look bad when their arch-enemies repented so quickly while the Israelites had been chastised again and again to no effect.

Ibn Ezra expresses the opinion that there are those who create a poetry by their nature without learning and there are those who require learning. And when it is time that he is to receive a prophecy to relate, if he has neither the proper nature nor adequate learning, it is possible that he will not receive it. Ibn Ezra, in this very abstract way, seems to be saying that Jonah is trying to make himself less of an antenna for God's word.

When a person leaves Israel it is described as Yeridah – going downward, which is the mirror to making Aliyah –going up. Jonah first descended from Gath-Hepher to Jaffa, then descended into a ship, next he descended into the recesses of the ship, and then he fell into a deep sleep – which word is also linguistically related in Hebrew to descent. Finally, by the chapter's end, Jonah began what started off as a climb upward only to move further and further down, further inward, and out of the story by trying to escape life itself. The king's vayakom (he rose up) near the end of the book is a direct taunt of the prophet, who failed to rise even when told directly to do so by his God.

Who is this person who wants to run away? One midrash identifies Jonah as the son of the widow whom Elijah the prophet helped keep alive. Jonah was the son of truth, ben Amitai, a son who was himself born and reborn and finally born once again when he accepted the prophetic role he originally resisted. Rather than view Jonah as someone who ran away from God and failed to complete his mission, this midrash sees the fact that he survived near drowning and life inside the belly of a fish as a spiritual accomplishment that merited a return to paradise itself. All of which was meaningless for Jonah. Jonah believed his life was characterized by one act: his sin, the rejection of God's task, and thereby, his rejection of God.

Whereas a prophet's job revolves around words, Jonah's relationship to God is characterized instead by a deafening silence.

The prophet must embody God's words, live them, and then continue to live them while actualizing them in the lifeblood of his people.

This is difficult.

This difficulty is why Moses and Jeremiah try to avoid doing what God wants. The process of negotiation present in the Moses and Jeremiah narratives is notably absent in the Book of Jonah. Unlike Moses and Jeremiah, who each respectively rejected God's call for different reasons but articulated their hesitations and self-doubt, Jonah's failure to use words, propelling his body in one direction or another instead, meant that he could not properly come to terms with the immense responsibility before him. God does not seem to have a problem with having

doubts about becoming a prophet. God does seem to have a problem with a potential prophet not recognizing their inner turmoil and expressing that turmoil in words.

It seems clear from the various prophets in the TaNaKH that the character or description of the prophet or the receiver of revelation was not as significant as the message. When we think about Balaam, to whom God spoke directly, it seems that he is not deserving of prophecy, especially if we regard it as a reward for superior moral judgment and behavior. So prophecy is not a reward for being better than everyone else.

Now the prophet can act as an agent who merely channels the will of the One who appointed him. When the prophet acts as a representative, that prophet can act in place of God. Jonah might have hoped to act as God's representative in destroying the enemy, when his task this time was to act as God's agent in helping them be better. In this circumstance, Jonah seemed uninterested in being either God's agent or representative.

If a prophet is measured by the way that a human being channels God's desire for the world He created, then it leaves Jonah cold and isolated among prophets. God, in the book's lingering last question, implied that Jonah did not care for God's creatures, 120,000 people and their cattle.

When the lack of words from Jonah to God became hostile words expressing Jonah's feelings - and then God questioned the very sincerity of those words, Jonah retreated into the silence that characterized him throughout. Sometimes in the face of a theology you cannot accept, silence is the only authentic response.