

One of my favorite readings on Yom Kippur is the story of Jonah. I think I like it because it is written like a story, and well, I love to be a story teller.

Once upon a time there was a man named Jonah. And God spoke to Jonah, son of Amittai, telling him to go to Nineveh, that great city, and tell them how awful they have been and that God is demanding that they turn from their evil ways or God will destroy them.

And what does Jonah do? He runs! We know he is in Israel, in Jaffa, he finds a ship going to the farthest place he could possibly think to go, Tarshish. We know that while he is on the ship, God causes a great storm that tosses the ship around and Jonah just sleeps through it all. The sailors, all of them having their own faith, pray to their gods, beg that they are saved to no avail. And finally, when they see that Jonah is asleep in the middle of this great storm, they demand to know who he is and that he should cry out to his god. After the casting of a few lots, they discover that it is Jonah's fault, which he does not deny, that the storm is before them, about to destroy them. Jonah openly admits that he is a Hebrew, that he knows and fears God, maker of heaven and earth. Jonah takes responsibility for the storm because he is running from God and the mission God gave to him to go to Nineveh and tells them to cast him into the sea. With some hesitation, the men on the ship do this and the sea stops turning.

A great fish appears and swallows Jonah. For three days and nights, Jonah is in the fish and he says to God, "For you cast me into the deep, in the heart of the seas; and the floods surrounded me; all your billows and your waves passed over me. Then I said, I am cast out from Your presence; yet I will look again to Your Holy Temple." And after three days, the fish spews Jonah out on the land and once again called out that he should go to Nineveh and deliver God's message to the people of the city. After only traveling a single day into Nineveh, Jonah warns the people that in forty days the city will be overthrown if they do not repent soon.

The people put on sackcloth and ashes and they pray that God will turn over the decree of destroying the city and save every soul. And God does in fact spare the city.

However, we see in the final chapter that Jonah is upset by this outcome! Jonah knew that God was gracious, merciful and slow to anger and of great kindness and would not destroy the city if the people simply repented. He is so upset by God's compassion that he prays that God will just take his own life! But God does not answer this call and Jonah places himself in a small booth on a hill so that he could see what would become of the city. And God provides a great plant to provide him with shade and he is comfortable. But then, just as quickly as the great plant appeared it was gone the next day, and again, Jonah was left to burn in the hot sand. Again, he calls out for God to take his life. And when God says to Jonah, 'why are you so distraught by the loss of this plant? It was only with you for one day, how could you have become so attached to a plant that you neither planted nor tended to?' And God says to Jonah in the final verse, "And should I not spare Nineveh, that great city, where there are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?"

That's it! That's the end of the story? We are left with a question! Typical Jewish text, leave us with a question and no answer!

What is the purpose of our reading this book of Jonah, four chapters in length, on Yom Kippur? What does it have to teach us on this day of repentance? There is a top layer from which we learn – everyone has the opportunity and ability to turn from their wrong ways and start again. Everyone has the ability to change how he or she behaves and become better people in order to temper God’s severe decree. That God is a loving and passionate God who, if we turn our ways to the right path, we will be forgiven. Is not this what it says in the *Unatantokef*? “But repentance, prayer and charity temper judgments severe decree. It is not the death of sinners that you seek O God, but rather that we should turn our ways and return to you.” Jonah is the story that there is hope, even when we think that there is none. We are never so far gone as to not be able to turn back and find a new path.

It’s a beautiful story, however, there are other pieces to this story that can bring enlightenment to us on this Kol Nidrei evening and inspire us and even allow us to question and wrestle with during this sacred time.

Let us begin with where Jonah is supposed to go and where he tries to go. God calls out to Jonah and tells him to go to the great city of Ninevah and tell the people to turn from their evil ways. But where is Ninevah? It is in Mesopotamia and is the great city known to be the home of the Assyrians who would later succumb to the Babylonians. It would be this great nation that would later come to destroy the people of Israel and carry them off into Diaspora. What is it that Jonah knew? Why would he be so concerned about this when he might not even have known that the Assyrians would be the ones to later destroy Israel?

Jonah is considered to be one of our Prophets. However, we have to be careful when we use the term “prophet.” What does this mean? On the surface, we may say that these were the individuals who would cry out to the people and tell them what they are doing wrong! But really, there are two types of prophets – there are those who we call “Prophet” and those who we call “Nevi.” While we might think they are one and the same, for *Nevi* literally means Prophet, they are quite different. For a Prophet can see the future but cannot change what will happen. A *Nevi* does not see the future but by crying out to the people, HOPES that he will be able to make a change for the future.

Jonah was in fact a Prophet, for why he fled is because of that which he saw. Jonah knew from the moment God told him to go to Ninevah and tell the people to repent, that they would, and God would not destroy them but that this people would later destroy Israel. So he fled, to the furthest place he could go, to Tarshish, a place near Spain. But one cannot flee from God’s calling.

And when Jonah learns that he cannot flee, and as he never denies his identity as a Hebrew, Jonah is cast out into the sea and into the belly of the great fish. These words of his going down in to the deep and being able to look again at God’s Holy Temple seem to be dismissed as we are so intrigued by the fish. But it is not the fish that we should focus on; rather, it is the surrounding pieces of this story. Jonah challenges the quick turn of faith by the sailors when in great trouble they suddenly pray to God, Jonah’s God, that they should be spared any harm because they throw this man into the sea. That the people of Ninevah should all of a sudden turn from their idol worship and pray to God because of the looming threat of their destruction. Jonah is upset that through his actions and his words to the sailors and

people of Ninevah, that they might turn toward God, but he knows that all of this is only temporary and superficial. They will get bored of God and go back to the excitement they found in their temples and idol worship. That the words they share in praising God on high have very little meaning or teeth. Their conversion is only temporary.

For Jonah, if something does not last forever, then it is not truth, it has no meaning. For Jonah, he believes in the existential assumption that in order for something to have meaning it must have no end. However, God challenges this idea with Jonah, knowing full well what the descendants of the people of Nineveh will do to the Israelites in a future generation. God gives him the gourd to provide shade, yet Jonah does not care for it and then when it is gone, he mourns the loss. God tells Jonah, the gourd was very real, yet, it did not last. Yes, in life, things or times that have limits, that are not infinite, do have meaning and are real. Just as in death – life has more meaning because we know that our lifetimes are limited.

Jonah is a part of something greater than himself, and this is a difficult lesson that he, the *Prophet*, is not able to fully understand or accept. Yet it is our challenge, tonight, for us to learn from and grow with. We are a part of something that is greater than ourselves and while our time is limited, there is much we have the opportunity to do and even change, no matter where we are in our lives.

No one has a crystal ball that can tell our future. But we are in control of our lives in this moment that shapes the next. It is our responsibility to not sit in silence when injustice or frustration crowds our world. When we are challenged because someone speaks against that which we believe or know to be true, do sit in silence? Or do we seek justice? Do we turn our backs and say, I will just not cast my lot and allow the chips to fall where they may? Or do we stand up and demand to be heard not allowing someone else to speak for us?

These hours of Kol Nidrei and Yom Kippur call upon us to examine our world and ourselves. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik teaches that the goal of *teshuva* and this time of Yom Kippur is not to become burdened by all that we have not achieved, but instead to become challenged to achieve our potential. He writes, “The power stored up within each of us is exceedingly great, but all too often it slumbers within and does not bestir itself from deep sleep.”

These past few years we have felt helpless in a world in which our financial dreams slip through our fingers. Savings depleted, jobs lost, homes downsized, it is a part of a new reality. We have felt lost in the belly of the fish with no light and no idea which direction we were going. But we have emerged in to a new reality, one that has made us stronger. I have watched over these past few years how we have come together to care for one another, share resources, and support our community in times of need. And that has made us richer. It has left us with the feeling that we can accomplish anything when we do so together. Yet, there is still more work to be done and there are still those who are looking for a way out of the depths. And we call out and remind ourselves to not stop caring, not stop building and not stop reinvisioning our world together.

We take on the part of the role of the *Nevi* in which we cannot see the future but we can hope and we can act in a way in which we want to make a difference. We do not have to sit

like Jonah and watch from the hill and wonder what will the world do? How will others act? What will be the outcome? Tonight, we look out from the hill, we lift ourselves up and we ask, where is it that I can go to make a difference, because I know that I can.

We know that our lives are limited. We know that all life comes to an end, but unlike Jonah, we do not wait for death to approach us. Rather, we live each moment to its fullest knowing that even our days are limited, our actions can create an infinite effect on our world, our community and our families. We can choose hope over despair: even when we feel that we are at the bottom of the great sea, we can choose to swim toward hope and the surface of a new reality. Is this not the message of our Yom Kippur? As we examine our lives, God asks that we not just accept our fate as being complete, but rather, God invites us to turn, return, and turn again to a new path of righteousness, compassion, and respect. We do not know the future, but we are in control of today, this moment. And so, as a people of *neviim*, what message do you cry out and what actions do you take to claim control of your life toward hope and what actions do you take to not just watch to see what the rest of the world will do, but what you will do to ensure that our world is complete because you are here?