

The Book of Jonah – Yom Kippur 5781

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This year, the High Holidays are different. It's not just that so many of us are apart, not packed into benches in the chapel with our voices united in song; not greeting each other after shul; not inviting each other over for meals and admiring each other's apple cakes. This year, my prayer is qualitatively different. This year we are assaulted on all sides: pandemic, global climate change and wildfires, inept and corrupt governance; the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg; no justice for Breonna Taylor; even *actual Nazis*. Every day that my husband goes to work in the restaurant industry I pray, "God, return him to me, shield him." I have never had so little control over the conditions of my life – the very air we breathe is charged with the potential of death. This Rosh Hashanah, I prayed like a child, ignoring the philosophical arguments that God does not act in history, the sophisticated things that I normally believe. "Please God," I begged, "We depend on you. Think of the widows and the orphans, the martyrs in your name. Protect us."

That very dependence and vulnerability are a theme that runs through the Book of Jonah, a story, I want to argue, that explores dependence as both praiseworthy and terrifying. Like Jonah, we are suspended in the belly of the *dag gadol*, the great fish: it is not yet the election; it is not yet the next COVID peak. In Jewish tradition, the belly of the fish is associated with the womb.¹ In Christianity, it prefigures Jesus's tomb. We are in a liminal space, defined by the anthropologist Victor Turner as a threshold between two states; a moment of *becoming*. Around us is danger and we are deeply dependent for our continuing safety on systems and leaders far beyond our reach. We do not know what lies ahead of us. And yet, in the midst of our vulnerability and fear, what truths are newly revealed? What is our path forward?

The Book of Jonah begins with God's command: "*Kum, lech*" – get up and go. "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim judgment upon it; for their wickedness has come before me" (Jonah 1:1). But, blasphemously, Jonah rejects this command and attempts to flee to the ends of the earth, to Tarshish, in southern Spain. As the commentator Malbim (1809-1879) writes, "[W]hy did Jonah not heed God's voice? He should have sprinted joyfully to get human beings to repent from their evil way...? And how could Jonah transgress God's command by suppressing his prophecy? A prophet who does this is liable to the death penalty!" Or to paraphrase many commentators, what kind of prophet is able to speak directly to God and yet is such an idiot that he thinks he can escape "*milifnei YHVH*," away from God, simply by boarding a boat? As Psalm 95 declares, "The sea is God's, God made it; and the land, which God's hands fashioned." The very idea is absurd.

¹ The Medieval commentator Abarbanel (1437-1509) argued that Jonah could have easily survived in the belly of the fish for three days, because "after all, fetuses live nine months without access to fresh air." There is also a complex midrash in the Mekhilta that envisions Jonah as too comfortable in the belly of the great fish so he is transferred to the stomach of a similarly sized pregnant fish, whose stomach is so full that he is cramped, leading Jonah to finally pray for salvation.

The Book of Jonah is indeed deeply enigmatic. It is a story of a Hebrew prophet who disobeys God while pious non-Jews model ethics and repentance. It begins with a command and yet ends with a question. Strangest of all, Jonah is arguably the most successful prophet in the Tanach. God speaks to him not in signs and wonders but directly, *panim al panim*. Despite speaking fewer than 200 words, Jonah converts non-believers everywhere he goes and causes tens of thousands of people to renounce evil and fully repent. Isaiah's eloquence and Moshe's closeness with God yield nothing near these results.

In a challenging and complex essay, "Jonah: A Fantasy of Flight,"² the contemporary Bible commentator Avivah Zornberg argues that Jonah flees from God because,

...Jonah is evading a radical human posture between death and life, from which one may cry out to the Other from the depths of one's creaturely vulnerability. Within such a posture, *chessed* – a generous compassion for oneself and others – becomes possible. Jonah, however, seems driven by an almost allergic reaction to the idea of *chessed*, linked as it is to the vulnerable human place between life and death.

Zornberg draws from the midrashic tradition to identify Jonah as the boy who died during a drought and was resurrected by the prophet Elijah (I Kings 17). She then turns to psychoanalytic theory to assert that this miraculous resurrection has left Jonah filled with blank spaces of trauma, represented as a lack of words and language, and suicidal desires, shown by his repeated prayers for death.

Why is Jonah so afraid? Even aside from Zornberg's concept of the traumatized survivor of resurrection, Jonah has good reason to fear. The prophet Jeremiah describes the experience of being God's prophet as feeling God's word "like a raging fire in my heart, shut up in my bones; I could not hold it in; I was helpless (*lo oochal*, I was not able)" (Jeremiah 20:9). No wonder Jonah rejects the call to prophecy, as we will see, Jonah is terrified of any connection and intimacy, and even without becoming a prophet he is already familiar with the experience of helplessness. After his burst of activity in booking passage on a ship, Jonah subsides into helpless passivity. He falls deeply asleep and only with the constant prodding of the sailors does he attempt to calm the seas. As Israeli Talmud professor Ruhama Weiss notes, he will not even jump into the water himself – he insists that the sailors throw him in.³ It takes him *three* days in the belly of the great fish to cry out to God, and when he does, the vulnerability and helplessness he has sought to evade pour forth:

אֶפְפוֹנֵי מַיִם עַד־נִפְּשׁ תְּהוֹם יִסְבְּבֵנִי סוּף חֲבוּשׁ לְרֵאשִׁי:

The waters closed in over me, The deep engulfed me. Weeds twined around my head.

² Zornberg, Avivah Gottlieb Ph.D. "Jonah: A Fantasy of Flight." *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 18:3. 2008, 271-299.

³ Weiss, Ruhama. "Jonah's Death Wish." *Sh'ma: A Journal of Jewish Ideas*, "Lessons from the Book of Yonah," 2012, http://shma.com/files/2012/09/jonah_s-death-wish/.

However, Zornberg rightly points to the way in which Jonah slips into the past tense throughout his prayer, not only describing his trials in the past tense, but also already claiming the certainty of his redemption.

As has often been noticed, he prays in the *past tense*. Essentially, this is a psalm of gratitude for past salvations – a strange prayer for one who needs salvation *now*. What is missing is any religious or moral awareness of his situation: he confesses no sin, nor does he pray for forgiveness. The existential terror of his condition remains quite unexpressed in this formulaic prayer of gratitude for past salvation.

Zornberg identifies Jonah's slipperiness – his unwillingness to confront the truth of his circumstances and his role in bringing them about, and argues that this proves that Jonah is unchanged by his journey to the depths. Six months into quarantine, I disagree with this reading. I would argue that it is precisely his existential terror that leads him to project himself into future satisfaction and safety.⁴ Who among us would not want to skip ahead to a future with a safe COVID vaccine, to be able to say (Jonah 2:3):

וַיֹּאמֶר קָרָאתִי מִצָּרָה לִּי אֱלֹהִים וַיַּעֲנֵנִי מִבֶּטֶן שְׂאוֹל שָׁמַעְתָּ קוֹלִי:

He said: In my trouble I called to the LORD, And He answered me; From the belly of Sheol I cried out, And You heard my voice.

But I think there is another element to this fear. It is not just fear of uncertainty, but of how uncertainty changes us. I am more afraid of the unknown because of the people I love. They are gaps in my armor – how will I go on if they are harmed? If I depend on them, how will I survive if they let me down? Jonah wishes for an armor with no gaps, he wishes to be impregnable.

Throughout the Book of Jonah, Jonah is almost completely solitary. He shuns the company of other people and responds to them minimally. As one contemporary scholar notes, “he speaks or is said to have spoken to others only four times.”⁵ Everywhere he travels, he leaves the company of other people as soon as possible. Even when God asks him direct and probing questions, Jonah demurs.

Anachronistically, I can imagine Jonah as he books his passage to Tarshish reciting the words of the Victorian poem “Invictus,” by William Ernest Henley: “I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul.” What need has a master and captain of kindness, of *chesed* and mercy, while he shapes his own destiny? Most of the time, Jonah aspires to neither depend on nor care for anyone else.

Caring for an infant over the past nine months has brought me face to face with deep dependence and vulnerability. I've always marveled that giraffes drop from their mothers' wombs already able to stand, unlike our babies, who remain achingly vulnerable for many months.⁶ As feminist philosophers have

⁴ Thanks to Eve Feldberg for this point.

⁵ Falumenhaft, Mera J. Flaumenhaft. “The Story of Jonah.” *The Review of Politics*, 76 (2014), pp. 1-19 (4).

⁶ Psychologist and philosopher Alison Gopnik argues in *The Philosophical Baby: What Children's Minds Teach Us About Truth, Love, and the Meaning of Life* that this extended period of dependence makes possible human creativity and intelligence. “It is... what makes all human beings human.”

long noted, we as humans are born dependent and utterly helpless, and many of us end our lives relying on the mercy and tenderness of our caregivers. The poetry of Jonah's prayer is resonant because all of us know what it means to be very young and very small, to cry out into the darkness, and to fear that no one will come.

Finally, in this moment of terror in the depths and darkness, Jonah loses the illusion of independence and openly yearns for closeness to and communion with God.

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He said: In my trouble I called to the LORD, And He answered me; From the belly of Sheol I cried out, And You heard my voice.

In two sets of parallel verbs, Jonah *calls out* and *cries out* and God responds to him, *answering him* and *hearing him*. It is a moment of mutuality, of the call and response that builds secure attachment between parent and child. The relationship between God and Jonah has been ruptured by Jonah's flight. In this prayer, that relationship is repaired. The prayer culminates in Jonah recommitting to God, vowing to perform sacrifices. Jonah declares his dependence on God and celebrates God's care and tenderness.

In the text, there are two groups of people who model this kind of interdependence and responsiveness, neither one Hebrews: the multi-national, polytheistic sailors and the (formerly) evil inhabitants of Nineveh. When Jonah reveals God's power to both groups, they instantly answer the divine summons, abandoning their former ways and devoting themselves to prayer, fasting, and sacrifice in the pursuit of salvation. Both groups work interdependently, without hierarchy, to such a degree that in Nineveh, the greatest to the smallest, the king and the cows alike, all dress in sack cloth.⁷ It is noteworthy that neither group does so based on the kind of evidence provided by prophets like Moses and Jeremiah (a staff becoming a snake, water-soaked wood igniting, etc.). Rather, they embrace the possibility⁸ of survival:

"Perhaps God will be kind to us and we will not perish" (Jonah 1:6).

"Who knows but that God may turn and relent? He may turn back from His wrath, so that we do not perish" (Jonah 4:9)

In his analysis of the Book of Jonah in The Prophetic Faith, philosopher Martin Buber (1878-1965) writes, "Human and divine turning correspond the one to the other, not as if it were in the power of the first to bring about the second, such ethical magic being far removed from Biblical thought but – "Who knows."⁹ These collective leaps of faith, journeys into the unknown, are about a human and divine interdependence which allows the sailors and the Ninevites to begin to change their reality, step by step. While Jonah is isolated and passive, the sailors and the city dwellers understand that attempting to

⁷ Flaumenhaft 12.

⁸ "Perhaps is a peculiarly Jewish response to the mystery of God's ways" (Zornberg 284).

⁹ Buber, Martin. *The Prophetic Faith*. Reprint Edition, Princeton University Press, 2015, pp. 129-180.

go it alone will sink their ship and destroy their city. Their survival depends on facing together the moment where they teeter between life and death, condemnation and redemption.

In contrast, back on dry land, Jonah once again cuts himself off not only from other people, but also from God. When his reluctant prophesying is a total success and every creature in Nineveh turns to fasting and prayer, causing God to avert the destruction of the city, Jonah is filled with rage. He begs God to kill him and withdraws, alone and silent, to the outskirts of the city. When God asks him a question, he refuses to reply, disconnecting from relationship. He is furious with God for accepting the repentance of Nineveh, but why? Jonah's own answer is to confront God with a recitation of a version of the Thirteen Attributes (Jonah 4:2):

וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל אֶל־יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי יְהוָה הֲלוֹא־אֲנִי דִבַּרְי עַד־הַיּוֹתַי עַל־אֲדָמָתִי
עַל־כֵּן קִדַּמְתִּי לְבָרַח תַּרְשִׁישָׁה כִּי יָדַעְתִּי כִּי אַתָּה אֱלֹהֵי חַנּוּן וְרַחוּם אַרְךָ אַפַּיִם
וְרַב־חֶסֶד וְנֶחֱם עַל־הַרְעָה:

He prayed to the LORD, saying, "O LORD! Isn't this just what I said when I was still in my own country? 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.

This version of the Thirteen Attributes is unique in including "renouncing punishment (*veniham al har'ah*)," something the text makes clear that Jonah does not believe in. Contemporary Bible scholar Jeffrey H. Tigay explains that Jonah represents an older tradition of strict justice seen in Biblical stories including Sodom and Gomorrah, Noah and the Flood, and the Tower of Babel.

Among these moral narratives, only the Book of Jonah gives a place to the concept of repentance. In the others the concept of strict justice reigns supreme: guilt must be paid for. To some extent these stories preserve an earlier conception of guilt which views it as an objective, almost physical force, somewhat comparable to disease... Just as no one would think that a disease could be cured by turning one's back on it, so it was incompatible with this ancient conception to think that guilt could be eradicated by repentance, by simply turning away from sin. Sin must be ritually or magically expiated, or expunged by punishment...

This new conception, opposed by Jonah but advocated by his biographer gained a foothold in Judaism. "God wants not the death of the sinner, but that he turn away from evil and live," as Ezekiel (18:23), followed by the High Holiday Mahzor, puts it.¹⁰

Sustained relationship is impossible without repentance and forgiveness. Weekly, and often daily, I betray my best intentions and let down my husband and children. But at my best, I also try to repent, to

¹⁰ Tigay, Dr. Jeffrey H. "The Book of Jonah and the Days of Awe." *Conservative Judaism* 38/2, 1985.

better understand where I went wrong and to strive to do better, and, in Buber's language, seeing me turn to them, they turn to me. No wonder Jonah is so alone – it would make him unbearably vulnerable to depend on others whom he will not forgive and who will refuse to forgive him.

The one gap in Jonah's defenses is his joy, his *simcha gedolah*, at the *kikayon* plant, sent by God, which springs up overnight and offers him shade. Jonah relaxes his solitude to welcome the plant, and allows himself to depend on it. When God sends a worm that destroys the plant, Jonah is again confronted with the bitterness of his vulnerability – not only is he now exposed, battered by sun and wind, but he has proven to himself once again that he should never take a leap into the unknown, never turn toward anyone or anything. He once again prays for death.

If only we could reach across time and space to comfort Jonah in his anguish. He is right: we do not know in advance which moments will become a womb, and which a tomb. We have no guarantee that forgiveness and trust offered will not lead to betrayal and loss. But the choice is not between safety and vulnerability, it is between vulnerability and an isolation and paralysis that makes Jonah yearn for death.¹¹ The Book of Jonah confronts us with the question of how to live with fear, and teaches us that real safety lies in interdependence, with God and each other.

This year, like children in the dark, we call to God:

הַשִּׁיבֵנו יְהוָה | אֵלֶיךָ וְנָשׁוּב [וְנִשְׁוֶבָה] חֲדָשׁ יָמֵינוּ כְּקֶדֶם:

Turn to us, O Lord, and let us come back. Renew our lives as in days of old.

¹¹ Thanks to Rebecca Ackerman for discussion of this point.