

Rabbi Rebecca Richman

Yom Kippur 5781

Yonah Study - Possibility of Transformation

In the Talmud (Megillah 31a), the Rabbis tell us that, on Yom Kippur afternoon, we are to read the book of Jonah as the Haftarah reading, but they don't tell us why.

The book of Jonah is, in some ways, an obvious fit for the day and for the themes of the High Holiday season. Let's take a few minutes to recap the story and explore some of the ways that its events and teachings are spiritually tied to this day of Yom Kippur, and to this moment of the afternoon service, in particular.

So, to recap: The book of Jonah tells the story of Yonah ben Amitai, Jonah the son of Amitai, who G!d instructs to go proclaim judgement in the city of Nineveh, wrought with wickedness. But Jonah flees from G!d, boarding a ship that takes him far away from the divinely ordained task.

G!d, of course, is cast as omniscient, all-knowing, and casts a great storm upon the sea. Jonah was sleeping. The rest of the crew was on the deck, fighting to survive and trying to determine who was responsible for the great misfortune.

Jonah 1:7 - *They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.* He admitted to them that he was fleeing from G!d. They took his suggestion to heave him overboard, into the stormy sea, which subsequently calmed. Then comes perhaps the most famous part of the story: Jonah is swallowed by a *dag gadol* - a large fish, which often is understood to mean: a whale. There, in the belly of the sea creature, Jonah remains for three days and three nights. He prays, seeking connection with G!d, who then commands the sea creature to return Jonah to dry land.

G!d tries again with Jonah, instructing him again to go to Nineveh. This time, Jonah goes directly. But the people there transform - they are turn back *midarkam ha'ra'ah* - from their evil/bad ways.

Jonah 2:10 - *So G!d renounced the punishment that had been planned for them, and did not carry it out.*

Jonah was displeased with G!d's forgiveness. He leaves the city and makes for himself a booth from where he can watch what happens in the city. There, at Jonah's perch, G!d teaches Jonah a lesson about the importance of mercy and forgiveness. G!d sends

a *kikkayon*, a kind of plant that is interestingly only mentioned here in all of Torah. The *kikkayon* provides much needed shade for Jonah. But the next day, G!d sends a worm to attack the plant and a harsh wind to accompany the scorching sun. Needless to say, Jonah is distraught - so much so that he dramatically says he would rather die. G!d responds:

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 I not have mercy on 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?! (Jonah 4:10-11).

It is here that the book ends.

If you're looking at this reading in your *mahzor*, your High Holiday siddur, you may notice that there are three additional verses after the book of Jonah. These are Micah 7:18-20, included in the Haftarah reading because of their thematic relation to the season of repentance.

But the book of Jonah concludes with G!d's teaching and Jonah's silence.

So what do we make of this book? How is it related to this season of repentance, to this day of atonement? Why do we read this book at this particular moment of the day, a time in which many of us are exhausted?

The Talmud, though it instructs us to read this book on Yom Kippur afternoon, gives us no indication as to the "right" answer to these questions - there are, of course, many possibilities.

Here is one lesson from the book that is most resonant for me right now: What the story of Jonah teaches us about *teshuvah*, repentance, is that the end goal is transformation, not wiping out. But this is not easy for Jonah to accept. He wants them to still be punished. When he finally arrives at Nineveh (after the boat, the whale, the second request from G!d), Jonah prophesied (3:4):

Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!

But in those days, the people of the city changed. They fasted, they put on sackcloth, sat in ashes, cried out to G!d. The king declared:

Let everyone turn back from their evil ways and from the injustice of which they are guilty (3:8).

וַיֵּרָא הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת־מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם כִּי־שָׁבוּ מִדֶּרֶכָם הָרָעָה

God saw what they did, how they were turning back from their evil ways.

וַיִּנָּחֵם הָאֱלֹהִים יָם עַל־הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר לַעֲשׂוֹת־לָהֶם וְלֹא עָשָׂה:

And God renounced the punishment (literally, comforted/consolated the bad) that G!d had planned to bring upon them, and did not carry it out (3:10).

Jonah was displeased. He desperately wanted justice to come over the people of Nineveh, so much so that he becomes angry with G!d when G!d's mercy spares the people, leads G!d to change plans.

"I knew you would do this! This is exactly why I fled the first time you told me to come here! I knew your compassion and grace, slowness to anger, abounding kindness, renunciation of punishment -- I knew that would all come out here!"

Why was it so important to Jonah that the initial plan of punishment, of overthrowing the city, would be carried out? Perhaps it would have been easier that way, easier for Jonah to have kept the people relegated as *ra*, evil, or bad, than to accept that they actually could change.

G!d's *rahamim*, mercy, and closing statement to Jonah, remind us that G!d is forgiving, that even someone - even a people - who behave abhorrently can change, can transform.

We want to believe this for ourselves -- we want to believe that we can atone for our wrongdoing, change our behavior, transform ourselves and continue to become better versions of ourselves. That's hard work, but it's not necessarily the hardest. Perhaps even harder than acknowledging our own shortcomings, working on them, changing them, and living into that new self -- perhaps even harder than all of that is forgiving someone else, accepting another person or a community that has grown from wickedness and transformed.

So perhaps the rabbis set us up to read this story on the afternoon of Yom Kippur to remind us that mercy is as important as is justice; that the forgiveness G!d may show us

today, as we exhibit our desire and process of transformation, is forgiveness that we ought afford others when they, too, exhibit change.

May we be courageous to transform and open to the transformation of those around us so that we may all merit life and goodness.