

## The Book of Jonah D'var Torah

2021

A few months ago there was an article in the NYTimes with the headline: Hasidic Mother of 10 has a new role: Doctor. How could this headline not draw your attention? Maybe some of you read it. Dr Alexandria Friedman grew up secular, graduated with a degree in biology, started medical school in her 20s, dropped out, became ultra religious, married a widower with 2 kids, moved to Monsey, after having 5 children yearned to go back to medical school. This was not a typical path for an ultra orthodox person let alone a woman. She received permission from her rabbi, graduated first in her class and had three more children while in medical school, two of whom are twins. In her interview with the NYtimes she said “There is a belief that if you don’t use the gifts given to you by God, you’re not really honoring God”.

I think her quote sums up the familiar story of Jonah who wanted to run away rather than use his prophetic gifts.

When Chana Bonn called me this summer to ask if I would give the D'var for Yonah, my yetzer harah immediately kicked in. After all, I had wondered for years why no one asked me to give a prime time dvar for the high holidays. Was I not smart enough? Deep enough, etc., etc but deep down I was also relieved because it takes a lot of time and work to prepare and I am not sure I have it in me. So the call came for Yonah, and I told Chana I needed a few days to think about it. I shared my thinking with Alan who let me know that my time slot was the most important time slot because it led into Ne'ilah, the most important service of YK. I felt a little better but I also felt nervous, not smart enough, etc. Yet, I said yes because it is important to have challenges and preparing to teach Torah is a huge challenge for me.

Turns out there is something called the Jonah Complex and I have it. Who knew there was such a thing? To quote Wikipedia “The Jonah Complex is the fear of success or the fear of being one's best which prevents self-actualization, or the realization of one's own potential. It is the fear of one's own greatness, the evasion of one's destiny, or the avoidance of exercising one's talents. Abraham Maslow, the American psychologist famous for creating the Maslow hierarchy of needs, is credited with naming this phenomenon but it was originally suggested by Maslow's friend, Professor Frank E. Manuel. Obviously, the name comes from the story of the Biblical prophet Jonah's evasion of his responsibility. Maslow states, "So often we run away from the responsibilities dictated (or rather suggested) by nature, by fate, even sometimes by accident, just as Jonah tried—in vain—to run away from his fate”.

In his wonderful dvar torah on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, Joel Fish, talked about what gets in the way of us doing teshuvah and changing. One of the things he mentioned was our past, our backstory. As I began to study about Jonah this summer, I became intrigued with his backstory, likely because I think about how I respond to others based on my past and what gets in the way of me being present and coming from my highest self. Much of what we know about Jonah's past comes from 11Kings and Midrash. In 11Kings we learn Jonah was from Gath-hepher, just north of Jaffa. This part of the Kingdom of Israel was assigned to the tribe of Zebulun which was a maritime tribe that traded on the high seas. Zebulun was blessed by his father Jacob " Zebulun will dwell at the shore of the sea and he shall serve as a port for ships." Sometime later, Moses blesses the descendants of Zebulun to rejoice in their journeys. So it is in Jonah's lineage to be at sea, to seek adventure.

We learn in the Talmud that Amitai, Jonah's father, was from Zebulun and his mother from the tribe of Asher. Jacob's blessing to Asher and his descendants was "Asher's bread shall be rich, and he shall yield royal dainties. We see a combination of wealth and travel. Moses blesses the tribe of Asher "Most blessed of son's be Asher, let him be the favorite of his brothers and let him dip his foot in oil. May your door bolts be iron and copper and your security last all of your days."

In her terrific book Jonah: The Reluctant Prophet, which should really be named, Everything you always wanted to know about Jonah but was afraid to ask, Professor Erica Brown suggests that the combination of these two tribes should result in children who would grow up and be destined for greatness, for oceanic travel, for leadership but we know in reading the story that Jonah resisted this destiny. Yes he did go to the sea but that was to run away from God not run to his calling.

We learn more about Jonah, in Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer, a midrash that retells and expands upon the stories of the Torah. One midrash tells the story about the time Elijah told King Ahab that there would not be rain in the land due to bad behavior from the Israelite leaders. Not acting correctly impacted weather. (On a side note, I find this reminiscent of our current climate crisis due to bad behavior from most human beings). Ahab was very angry and God told Elijah to go into hiding to avoid the wrath of King Ahab. Elijah was told to go east to a wadi and there he would be fed by ravens and would be able to drink water from the wadi. Eventually the wadi dried up because there was no rain and God instructed him to go to Tzorfas of Zidon where a widow would feed him.

Elijah goes to Tzorfas. He came to the woman who was so poor she was convinced she and her young son would die of starvation. Elijah asks her for water and a

bit of food and assured her, if she brought this, she would always have water and food. Soon after her son became ill and died. She said to Elijah “ Have you come to me to make my sin apparent?” Elijah took the son up to a private room and pleaded to God to revive the child and the child came back to life. Elijah returned the boy to his mother who said “Now I know that you are a man of God and the word of Hashem in your mouth is truth”

As Prof. Erica Brown notes, the widow enjoys the unlimited food she is blessed with but never thanks him or acknowledges his ability to create this miracle for her. When her son turns ill, she blames him and it isn't until her son comes back to life, she acknowledges that he is a man of God.

And just for a moment, I want to pause here and ask you if you have had that experience in the past year where you lost faith when things were rough, or could

not feel Gods presence when things were not going well? Did you get to gratitude only when things were better? Was God not part of the conversation at all when things were easy or hard?

Getting back to Jonah: The midrash tells us that the boy Elijah brought back to life was Jonah. Jonah ben Amitai. Jonah son of truth. So here we have Jonah who died and was reborn in truth. And as Prof. Erica Brown points out, he will be reborn again as a prophet. When does this happen? First Jonah is swallowed by a dag, a big male fish and according to midrash he is spit out into a big female fish who is pregnant. Jonah is really squished in and at that point begins to pray to G-d to live. When he is spit out onto Ninevah, he is reborn the third time as a prophet.

Any of the backstories about Jonah bring us to the same conclusion- Jonah comes to his job as a prophet with history, trauma, pain, tribal expectations, etc. And



so do we. Each of us comes to this moment in mincha of Yom Kippur with a backstory and not just one story but a lifetime of experiences, loss, trauma and good stuff, family, friends, joy and all of it shapes us and our ability to do teshuvah.

In his book Pathways of the Prophets, Rabbi Yisroel Reisman defines teshuvah as going back to your original struggle. Maybe at one point you acknowledged the struggle but then your yetzer harah normalized the struggle and you gave up or did not realize there was a struggle any longer. I have many struggles. One of them is my relationship with my sister. I spent years not speaking with her but once I started to study Mussar I began changing myself so I could speak with her. I softened my heart. It is often but not always a challenge to speak. It is sometimes a lot to work and sometimes not a lot of work. Sometimes it is easier then others times. Ultimately it is more important to engage in the struggle to be in relationship

with her then not to be in relationship because she is my sister and I love her even if I do not always like her.

I don't know about you but I am still struck by how surprised I get that life is hard. Where did I get the idea it should always be easy? It just isn't. Sure there is joy but there is plenty of pain because of the mere fact of being human.

Teshuvah is about working hard to reach high goals. This is where the growth happens.

Many years ago Alan and I met with a financial planner. He brought out a piece of paper with a simple outline of a house. The house had different rooms and was meant to represent the different facets of our life. The financial planner wanted us to think about each part of our life and what our ultimate goals were. It was very helpful to think in this way as we planned for our financial future.

The Slonomer rebbe says “The task of a person is like that of a person who is building an elaborate house on a foundation of rubble. The house remains perpetually in danger of collapse.” He goes on to say we must “have the courage to destroy the whole structure of the house and to dig deep and create a strong foundation. On top of the foundations person can build and establish a strong building.”

Towards the end of the story, Jonah builds himself a sukkah to live in and watch from afar what God will do with Nineveh. As we know, a sukkah is a temporary shelter and while the sides might be sturdy, the roof is anything but. God provides a gourd to provide shade until God bring a worm to kill the plant. It is at this point that Jonah prays to God for death. He is hot and thirsty. Life is hard, He does not want to work at it. He does not understand that it is not enough to be a child

of truth. One must pair it with mercy, with compassion, with lovingkindness.

The message is clear, this is hard work, to break ourselves down and rebuild. Our spiritual house needs a firm foundation, walls, and roof. To get there we need to figure out which middot, virtues we have hidden from. This helps us identify what it is we are meant to do in this one lifetime.

We do not know what ever happens to Jonah based on the ending of the Book. I think that is because Jonah's story is not over. He continues to write his story until the very end of his life just like we continue to write our story. Jonah's was born in truth. He struggles with God who had many attributes including truth coupled with mercy. Jonah struggled to find mercy. So I leave you with a few questions just as the Book of Jonah ends with a question. Why are you here? What is your purpose? What middot do you need to correct? How

can you make your life more meaningful this year?  
What pain do you need to let go of to become kinder  
toward yourself and others this year? How can you  
make the world a better place?

G'mar Hatimah Tova, may we all be blessed with the  
fortitude to let go of defensiveness, look deep inside  
and bring more love into the world.