

You Cannot Escape from God

By Aaron Finestone, Minyan Masorti, September 25, 2023 (Yom Kippur afternoon)

Selections from Psalm 139, NJPS translation adapted

(Verse 7)

Where can I escape from Your spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, You are there;

If I descend to Sheol, You are there too.

If I take wing with the dawn

to come to rest on the western horizon,

even there Your hand will be guiding me,

Your right hand will be holding me fast.

If I say, "Surely darkness will conceal me,

night will provide me with cover,"

darkness is not dark for You;

night is as light as day;

(Verse 19)

O God, if You would only slay the wicked---

you murderers, away from me!---

who invoke You for intrigue,
Your enemies who swear by You falsely,
O, Adonai, You know I hate those who hate You,
and loathe Your adversaries.

In the *Jewish Study Bible* Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler explain Psalm 139 as follows: "God knows all that can be known; He is present in all places. No one can escape His reach. The divine attributes (mentioned in verses 1 through 18) which at first seem threatening to the psalmist (since God will discern his faults), become the basis for the psalmist's plea for God to destroy his enemies, who are also God's enemies" (verses 19-24); the psalmist is convinced of his innocence.'

Sound familiar? Psalm 139 is reflected in the Book of Jonah. Professor Uriel Simon author of *The JPS Bible Commentary: Jonah* concludes that the Book of Jonah was written during the Second Temple era. (p. xli). Berlin and Brettler think Psalm 139 was written in exilic or post-exilic times. (p. 1267). The influence of Jonah on Psalm 139 or Psalm 139 on Jonah is a book for another day.

Jonah will do everything to get away from God. Paraphrasing footnotes by Uriel Simon, Jonah takes extreme measures:

(1) He takes a ship to Tarshish, possibly the Phoenician colony of Tartessus, in Southern Spain west of the straits of Gibraltar--as far away from Nineveh he can flee (p. 5);

(2) He was in such a hurry that he paid the full fare for unfilled seats on the ship (p.6),

(3) He admits blame for the tempest and invites the sailors to throw him overboard--acts of passive suicide (13)

All to avoid the call from God. (13)

Uriel Simon cites four themes which explain Jonah's unwillingness to prophesy against Nineveh.

(1) Atonement versus Repentance.

(2) Universalism versus Particularity.

(3) Prophecy: Realization versus Compliance.

(4) Compassion: Justice versus Mercy. (Pages vii-xiv)

I will discuss Justice versus Mercy.

According to Uriel Simon, Jonah argues on behalf of strict justice against the merciful God, who repents of his sentence. Strict justice demands punishment of sinners according to their wickedness. Strict justice is essential to deter transgressors.

Allowing the judge to stand above the law undermines the authority of the law and dims the doctrine of reward and punishment.

Uriel Simon says that Jonah must learn that

(1) the world can exist with both justice and mercy;

(2) the fear of sin is produced not only by fear of punishment, but also by the awe of salvation and the fascination with grace and absolution.

If Jonah is to be freed from the idea that divine compassion expresses weakness of mind and softness of heart, he must experience God's heavy hand himself.

Uriel Simon says that Jonah foresaw both the submission of the evildoers of Nineveh, terrified by their impending destruction, and the acceptance of their repentance by the merciful God. Jonah was totally wrong to believe that he would be allowed to escape to Tarshish.

Jonah's pretense to knowledge is undermined by:

(1) The fish that saves him from death but imprisons him in his belly until he gives up his flight and begins to pray; AND

(2) The qiqayon that saves him from his distress but vanishes as suddenly as it appeared.

Only when Jonah, the proponent of strict justice realizes his own humanity can he understand the dependence of morals on human and divine mercy. (p. xii), Uriel Simon

concludes.

Jonah is a prophet of secrets. Neither Jonah himself, nor the text state why he is running from God. What is he afraid of? What is he trying to avoid. What is inside his mind?

Nevertheless, Jonah is a success at prophecy.

Professor Christine Hayes of Yale University explains that Jonah, the reluctant prophet produces maximal results with minimal effort. He made no effort to convince the sailors of anything except the need to throw him overboard. After their encounter with Jonah, the sailors revere God, offer sacrifices and make vows.

Once in Nineveh, Jonah utters a mere five words (literally, "forty days more, Nineveh is overthrown"), and in response even the cattle cry out to heaven. Jonah does not condemn the Ninevites, speak of God, or call upon the people to repent and save themselves. Unlike the classical prophets who railed against the people, cited the causes of God's anger and preached forgiveness through repentance, Jonah offers no instruction, no comfort, and no insight.

Christine Hayes says Jonah is incapable of failure. Unintentionally, indeed against his will, Jonah brings the non-Israelite sailors to the worship of God and triggers the moral reform of the wicked Ninevites. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel would have given their eyeteeth to have had so powerful an effect with so few words, Christine Hayes says. (p. 396-397)

The Assyrians are spared. And Jonah is furious.

He prayed to God saying, "O Adonai! Isn't this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish. You are a compassionate and gracious god, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment. Please, Adonai, take my life, for I would rather die than live." Adonai replied, "Are you that deeply grieved?" (4:1-4).

According to Christine Hayes, There is no response from Jonah, who leaves the city to sulk. His complaint is two fold:

(1) If you are going to punish the wicked, then just punish them.

(2) If are planning to spare them, then just spare them. Don't waste my time with messages and oracles.

Jonah's stronger problem is the lack of punishment for the wicked. Jonah is indignant that the Assyrians did not get what they deserved. What happened was just what he knew would happen, right from the outset, and that is why he refused a fool's errand. (396-397), Christine Hayes concludes

In an hour or two, judgment on the past year will be sealed. Each of us has our own gifts from God. It is our responsibility to use our gifts. Address the challenges of our times. You can not escape from God

Sources:

Jewish Study Bible, Second Edition, edited by Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Bretler, Oxford University Press, USA, New York, 2014

JPS Bible Commentary: Jonah by Uriel Simon, Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia 1999

Introduction to the Bible (The Open Yale Courses Series), by Christine Hayes, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2012

All quotes and paraphrases are adapted and condensed.