

JONAH: The Prophet Who Could Not Change

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One night a ship's captain was on the open sea when he spotted a light straight ahead in the distance. He flashed his signal light telling the other ship to veer 10 degrees to the West so they could safely avoid a collision.

There was a return signal telling the captain to veer 10 degrees to the East. The captain signaled "I am a captain and demand you change your course. Who are you?" The response was, "I am a seaman and I am telling you to change your course."

The captain then responded, "I command this large freighter with an important cargo." The seaman answered, "I am a seaman who monitors this lighthouse."

The questions that might be elicited, Are you the Captain who feels he should not change? Are you the lighthouse attendant who cannot change? Or are you one who can easily change?

One of the questions that must be asked on this holiest of days is, "Do we truly have the ability to change?" Are we like the lighthouse or are we the captains of our own ships? Having come to this day searching for our better selves and hopefully having passed through a period of internal wrestling with ourselves, the goal should be that we enter this new year not only with hope but also with a plan for improvement. To begin the year without some ideas and aspirations for improvement is to ignore every one of the multiple lists of transgressions, denying any faults.

In the afternoon, we will once again hear the Haftarah from the Book of Jonah. Erica Brown, in her book Jonah; The Reluctant Prophet, suggests that this prophetic book is not actually about Jonah but about God. In it we see how the sometimes perceived harsh and punishing

Deity is able to change and compassionately forgive the city of Nineveh. This is not the first time in the Tanakh that God is willing to change a planned course of action. When Abraham argues with God and questions, "Must not the Judge of all the earth do justly?" God is willing to spare Sodom and Gomorrah if there are 50, 45, 40, 30, 20, or only 10 righteous individuals among the population.

Jonah's hiding, running away, and anger reflects a possible resentment that God has changed plans to punish the evil city. Jonah does not have the moral stature of Abraham. Brown's thesis is that we read this book on Yom Kippur, "... not because of Jonah but because of the God of Jonah." We, the listeners who are hopeful as we face our own futures might say to ourselves, if the almighty God can change, can we? Brown asks, "Can we adjust, adapt, amend, refine, and modify who we are on this holiest of days because God also changes? Or are we, like Jonah, secret believers that nothing ever changes, least of all who we are?"

Can you remember past years when you made resolutions to change some aspect of your behavior or lifestyle? Were you able to follow through on those desired alterations? Was it easy or difficult? Have the adjustments continued for you or was there a time either soon after or sometime later that you reverted to old patterns?

Rather than confronting his ability to change, some say the Book of Jonah is a warning about a prophet who rejects his mission. For others that might translate into a warning about not acting when needed or when we see something wrong. It would be a calling against standing idly by the blood of our neighbors which is forbidden in Leviticus. It counteracts the sin of silence in the face of injustice. God offers Jonah not only a mission but a chance to help others repair their own lives. Jonah has the chance to call out against injustice and cruelty so that the Assyrian people in Nineveh might mend their ways.

Brown cites the great teacher Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. His lesson was that Jonah is symbolic of every person who runs away

from social justice and obligation. Heschel wrote, "Jonah is running to Tarshish, while Nineveh is tottering on the brink. Are we not all guilty of Jonah's failure?" Brown interprets this as Jonah being unable to change or accept God who changed, from punisher to forgiver. She surmises that, "In that refusal, he re-fashioned the God that was, for the God he wanted." The comedian Brad Stine offers this unfortunate reality that can be applied to many of us. "If the truth conflicts with my beliefs, I **change** my beliefs." Are we also guilty of reinterpreting the facts to fit our comfort levels?

Is that a pattern for people who are unable to change? Do they see change in others and reject that for themselves? Do they seek to change others in their inability to change themselves? When individuals confront problems with others it is helpful to realize that it is much harder, if not impossible, to change the other person. Rather it is more likely that we have some ability to change ourselves. Yes, at times we hope very deeply that they too will find the willpower and courage to

change. But it is only within our power to enact our own personal change.

There is another aspect of the limitations of change that we should not ignore. No matter how hard we try we'll never be able to change the past or the present; only the future. This may sound obvious but too often we dwell on what we should have done and vision it only in what has already happened. What we should have done is only helpful when we apply it to the next situation.

Our rabbis teach this in the thinking about the full process of teshuvah. First, we need to acknowledge what we have done wrong. We need to feel this but must also act upon it. The first act of course is the apology, the asking of forgiveness from the one we have wronged. This should be done publicly. Some say that is the reason a murderer can never fully repent since they are unable to ask forgiveness from the one they have killed. There is a teaching that if the offended party

has died, the offender should gather ten family members or associates around the grave and then ask forgiveness.

The asking of forgiveness doesn't end the process. It is important to make amends. Some might think this is the end of the trail, but Judaism adds one more factor. This is the reality of change being done in the future. Our teshuvah is complete when we are faced with the same situation again but this time act appropriately, not committing the transgression.

In the book of Jonah, we see an individual who cares more about his own comfort than the 120,000 humans and all the animals in the city of Nineveh as he sits in the blazing sun. He cared more about a single plant that he did not plant himself yet provided him shade than the individuals who were destined to face God's wrath but were saved in the end by their own repentance. God attempts to point out to this tragic figure, whom I call a failed prophet, that his lack of compassion and concern were caused by his inability to react when needed. But

ultimately it is Jonah who needs to accept the responsibility that has been thrust upon him for the greater good.

Brown quotes John Gardner, from his work, Self-Renewal: The Individual and the Innovative Society: "More often than not, we don't want to know ourselves, don't want to depend on ourselves, don't want to live with ourselves. By middle life, most of us are accomplished fugitives from ourselves."

We might not agree entirely with this statement, but the lack of understanding of ourselves certainly provides a roadblock to the possibility of productive change. It is amazing how people who are in the best position to understand their own motivations and behaviors so often need someone else to point out the obvious to which they might be blind. Therapists would go out of business if we were all able to understand the rationale behind our behaviors and actions.

Others saw another message in the book of Jonah which has become intertwined with these Days of Awe. The Assyrian capital city

Nineveh, known for its cruelty and evil nature, becomes a place where the King and the population repent from their sins, atone, and are forgiven. If these people can change then the thinking is, so can we. That is personal for us. But Jonah is also a universal book as opposed to Jewish particularity. All humans have the ability to repent and be forgiven by God. We do not hold a monopoly on repentance or atonement.

This can serve as a reminder that even the dreaded enemy, Assyria's capital city, Nineveh, in the Book of Jonah's case, can actually do teshuvah and repent. This does not mean that Assyria is all good. History has taught us that Assyria was a vicious conqueror and destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel. From that destruction and the exile of the Israelite population, ten tribes were wiped out of existence. They are referred to as the 10 Lost Tribes. Knowing this might make Jonah's hesitancy to warn them to repent more understandable.

After a thorough examination of this period we see that these Israelites were not able to hold on to their traditions and their belief in the One non-corporeal God. Most likely they accepted the other false Gods and idols of the Assyrian empire. They weren't lost, rather they lost their way.

Although this lesson is not found in the Jonah story, when we think of Nineveh and Assyria we should be cognizant of the story that so much of the Israelite population disappeared from existence. This probably came about because they no longer practiced their customs nor continued to worship their God. That is a lesson that can speak to us, and should speak to us. It is not the attacks on us as a people that cause our total disappearance from history, although we know our numbers can be diminished drastically by horrendous forces of evil. Rather it is when we, the Jewish people no longer value our traditions, customs, and beliefs that we create our own demise. It is as if we are the people are like Jonah and try to run away from the call of God. We

turn our back on our own mission to be an עם קדוש, holy people.

hopefully as a people and each of us as individual Jews will respond to the call to secure our future. Some of us need too keep on doing what we already do. Others might have to make the changes to perpetuate Jewish continuity.

One other area in regard to change that we might consider is how does our change affect others? A simple example is when we decided to change a profession. What effects does this have for our family? Behavioral changes also have their consequences and benefits for others. Are we able to weigh these as we make changes? Some personal changes are for good but also there might be unintended consequences?

Changes need to be made with careful thought and planning. They also require our commitment to ensure they are effective. Jonah remains in the belly of the fish for three days. Three days is a common

amount of time for contemplation, preparation, and waiting throughout the Tanakh.

Here are a few biblical examples. Abraham travels for three days with Isaac, not knowing the final outcome of this journey. Moses tells the people to prepare for three days at the foot of Mount Sinai, before he is to bring them the Ten Commandments. We know this takes more time. Esther prays and fasts for three days before going to King Ahashverous to tell him of Haman's evil plan. These are only a few examples.

In some cases three days can seem like a long time. Imagine being cooped up inside the fish for that time. Often when looking back it is more like a flash in time. Perhaps the three days as suggested by Brown are that the first day is the point of crisis. The second day becomes a time when we must accept the reality no longer being able to deny the inevitable. Finally on the third day we hopefully are prepared to enact a plan to enable us to move on.

Thinking about this on Yom Kippur made me surmise that the day of deep reflection might be more useful if it was extended for three days. But really, who would benefit from that long of a 24 hour fast on three consecutive days. I have to admit I admire our Muslim friends who are able to fast, sun up to sun down for the entire month of Ramadan.

Actually the contemplation for change begins for us 40 days ago. Once the month of Elul begins we start preparing for this the tenth day of Tishrei, Yom Kippur. Once Rosh Hashanah is upon us we have the ten days of repentance to do serious soul searching. In reality today is the culmination.

Getting back to what we are here for today. The importance of being able to change and improve ourselves is necessary and possible. As our Torah portion reminds us, "...it is neither beyond you or too far away."

May it be your will O Eternal, that you bless us with the will and ability to change, even just a little bit. May we make use of our own strengths to alter our behavior to bring more good, more kindness and compassion, and more peace into our world.

כן יהי רצון

Be this *God's* will as well as our own!