

The Jonah Complex: Yom Kippur in the Time of Pandemic

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Imagine just for a moment that you're Jonah whose story we read on Yom Kippur.

It's the 4th or 5th century BCE and you're an ordinary Joe(nah) minding your own business. You're not the most righteous or the least righteous guy in your village, sure you have a bit of a temper, but you fulfill your obligations. You wake up, tend your crops, return home, and repeat. Day in, day out, except for Shabbat, of course, when you and your household take a breather. All you want is to provide for your family until your children are grown, your beard is gray, and you've breathed your last.

Then out of nowhere, uninvited, God calls to you, *demands* you to disrupt your life, tells you to schlepp across the desert, all the way to Nineveh, the land of your enemies. Your mission: to tell the Ninevites that they must change their corrupt ways or God will destroy them. "No, thank you," you think, hopping a ship as far across the sea as possible. Yonah means dove, and true to your name, you take flight, fleeing, escaping this moment that requires fortitude.

Once on the ship, you stowaway in the ship's hold, shutting out the world. God will have none of it. You can run, but you can't hide. Suddenly, the waves rise, and the ship is tossed upon the seas. The ship's crew, realizing they've courted disaster by allowing you on their vessel, heave you overboard. Quickly you fall down, down down, into the turbulent sea, when, floating in the depths, the jaws of a gigantic fish engulf you, and again, you're on another swift descent, this time into the fish's belly.

You cry out to God. You make promises. You swear you'll never again take for granted one moment of your precious life, nor will you ever squander another opportunity to help others. Upon reciting this prayer, the fish spits you onto dry land, and, true to your word, you follow God's instructions, and preach to the people of Nineveh, who see the error of their ways, repent, and all's well with the world again.

If the story ended here, one could understand reading it on Yom Kippur. At this juncture, Jonah learns his lesson, the people of Nineveh are saved, and everyone lives happily ever after. It's a perfect tale for teaching us the power of *teshuvah*, repentance.

Except this is *not* where the story ends.

The story ends just afterward when the world resumes a regular rhythm. With the crisis averted, Jonah ricochets back to his old habits—embittered, reluctant to change, craving his old way of life. He's always dissatisfied: the sun is too hot, a plant he loved has died, God let the Ninevites off too easily. One can imagine God looking aghast at this overly entitled man-child.

The book ends with God asking: “Shouldn’t I love all the creatures I’ve created in this world?”¹ And Jonah’s response? Total silence.

I’ve never fully understood why we read this book on Yom Kippur. Honestly, Jonah is a bit of a jerk.

Then Covid 19 struck a nursing facility in Kirkland, and we all fell down, down, down into the depths of this pandemic. Like Jonah, we plummeted, drowning in waves of confusion and fear.

And it dawned on me: Perhaps we read the book of Jonah on Yom Kippur because Jonah’s story is an object lesson for us. When circumstances disturb his daily routine, he’s incapable of change. He lets his fear and anger paralyze him. And when the trouble ends, he cannot imagine his future looking any different from his past.

When this pandemic ends, and it *will* end, and we awaken to the new reality that awaits us, will we be like Jonah, returning to our old habits of mind, carrying old grudges, blind to the new possibilities of the future? Or will we seize the opportunity of this pandemic to ask ourselves what is the future we genuinely want and what must we do *now* to realize it?

Jonah’s path is an understandable one. One classic commentator has said that Jonah is beset “with a sickness, a sadness of heart.”² Who among us has not felt this same sadness of heart in this past year? We each have stories to tell, grief to convey. In every household *something* has been lost because of this dreadful coronavirus.

In the early days of the lockdown there was nothing more sorrowful for me than to speak to a family who experienced a death from Covid 19. In addition to their mourning, these families carried the burden of feeling as if they could not honor their loved ones because they were unable to bury their dead and sit shiva together.

Couples eager to stand under the wedding huppah rescheduled their ceremony, and their marriage still awaits them, floating somewhere in their future.

B’nai Mitzvah students diligently prepared to lead this congregation, and then had the anguish of postponing services.

Graduates describe feeling robbed of their commencement festivities for which they’ve worked so hard for so many years.

Alcohol sales, eating disorders, medications for anxiety, depression and sleep issues are on the rise.

Marriages are being tested, and those who live alone are feeling more isolated than ever.

¹ This and other passages are adapted from the Book of Jonah

² Maharal as quoted in Shmuly Yanklowitz, *The Book of Jonah: A Social Justice Commentary*, CCAR Press, 2020, p.117

Grandparents miss hugging their grandkids. Parents scramble with online learning, balancing their workload, and maintaining their sanity.

All the while, we've had to contend with ordinary individual heartbreak that would have happened even without the pandemic—the cancer diagnosis; the parent with deepening dementia; the divorce papers that arrive at last; the secret pain of addiction; the loved one wrestling with mental illness.

And, on top of it all, the pandemic has revealed extraordinary societal heartbreak—a mass movement demanding to repair four centuries of racial injustice, arising out of our collective rage at the brutal deaths of people like George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. The devastation wrought by climate change. “Who by fire, and who by water”³, indeed. The fractious polarization and fear-mongering that is rotting the very core of our democracy. The appalling lack of empathy emerging from leadership as our nation grieves this historic moment.

After this unusual year, any of us could become Jonah. Who doesn't want to flee, deny what's required of us, overcome the discomfort of our current reality? Abraham Maslow, the 20th century Jewish psychologist saw in human beings a common pattern where—even in the best of times—we sabotage our own sense of fulfillment. He named this syndrome the “Jonah Complex.” He writes, “We all have unused potential. Many of us evade our [true] vocations. We run away from the responsibilities dictated by nature, by fate, just as Jonah tried—in vain—to run away from *his* fate.”⁴

When faced with the call from God, Jonah is beset with fear and anger, and he allowed those feelings to dictate his actions. What God realizes, and Jonah did not, is that every fear reveals a wish and all anger masks pain. God's question about the love that permeates all Creation is intended to awaken Jonah to his authentic self—he, too, in all his vulnerability, is loved. As Aviva Zornberg says, “The enigmas that enrage and sadden Jonah are not riddles to be solved. They remain; God invites Jonah to bear them, even to deepen them, and to allow new perceptions to emerge unbidden.”⁵

Perhaps I've misread the book of Jonah all along. Perhaps it is a testament of hope. Perhaps the unanswered question spurred Jonah to *really* change. Perhaps he finally realized that his future doesn't need to look like his past. Perhaps, knowing he is loved, he let go of old hurts and awakened to his highest self, enabling him to envision new possibilities for his life.

The unanswered question at the end of the book is intended for us too. God is calling us to be audacious in facing this pandemic. We, too, are loved. We, too, have the capacity to see opportunities to create the world anew.

This pandemic will end; yet the conditions that gave rise to it will not. The Army War College, of all places, has an acronym for life in the 21st century. We live in a VUCA world—it's

³ Unatana Tokef, High Holy Day Liturgy

⁴ Yanklowitz, p. 117

⁵ Aviva Zornberg, *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious*, Schocken Books, 2009, p.105

volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous.⁶ Even after the Covid 19 vaccine is widely distributed and this horrible pandemic is in our rear view mirror, we should be prepared for more unexpected global events—other health-related catastrophes, more environmental destruction, continued destabilization of old institutions, the meteoric rise of new technologies that will constantly disrupt our way of doing things.

We read the book of Jonah on Yom Kippur to remind us that we already have what we need to face this moment of history. We *can* let go of what has become dangerous for human life; and we have the capacity to discover new ways to flourish. We're not the first Jewish community to live in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world and we won't be the last. Like those who came before us, we have our time-tested Jewish tradition, the faith of our ancestors.

Think of the Jews in displacement camps in the 1940's, who rebuilt their lives after surviving the Shoah. Think of the Jews in shtetls destroyed by pogroms, who envisioned opportunities in the goldena medinot, lands far across the sea. Think about Jews who lived through the Inquisition, the black plague, the Crusades. Think about the devastated and visionary generation of rabbinic sages at the fall of the Temple in 70 CE. Think about Jonah, trying to make his way in the 4th or 5th century BCE. Think about all those ancestors building new lives of meaning when everything seemed to be swept away in a tidal wave of change. They possessed what we possess—our common Jewish faith.

And, for the record, faith is *not* submission to a hierarchical god-King that very few of us believe in anymore. "Faith arises out of limited human understanding, nudging [us] toward life's possibilities. Faith isn't an answer. Faith includes questions—usually lots of questions and allows us to navigate our way when we don't have it all figured out."⁷ In Judaism, faith is about responding to suffering, bringing healing where there is brokenness, and grabbing onto joy when it presents itself.

And, what's more, I *know*—regardless of how you might categorize yourself, agnostic, atheist, "spiritual but not religious"—you, listening to these words tonight, *you* embody this deeply held faith of our ancestors.

How do I know?

Because you're watching these services right now. If ever there were a High Holy Day season where you could opt out of services, it would be this year. And yet, you're here, bearing virtual witness to something greater than yourself, heeding the call of Yom Kippur to change our lives, to change our world. You are here because you believe in our ability to aspire to our highest selves, and to build the world we want to live in.

We enter the next 24 hours of Yom Kippur, prepared to envision the change we want to be in this world.

⁶ Bob Johansen, *Full Spectrum Thinking*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2020, p. 34

⁷ Johansen, p. 137

Prepared to see ourselves as loved.

Prepared to embody our faith.

In the words of Jonah, we pray:

You flung me into the heart of the sea.

All your waves streamed over me.

And I thought: I am banished from before Your eyes.

But You brought up my life from the fathomless depths...

As grief overtook me,

I remembered You, and my prayer came to You,

With a voice of thanksgiving.

I drew near to You

through acts of righteousness and faith.

Amen.