

Yom Kippur Morning 5784
We are Jonah
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Here in New England, we take pride in the local catch of the day. Maybe you heard about the local story in the news two years ago. In June of 2021, Michael Packard was scuba diving off the coast of Cape Cod to catch lobsters when he was suddenly jolted from his peaceful descent. His first thought was that he was attacked by one of the great white sharks that swim the Cape each summer. But he didn't feel cuts or pain. "I was just in this cavernous, dark place," he said. And then immediately, within 5 seconds, he realized that he was in the mouth of a whale. "I was 100% convinced I was going to die," he said. Then, about 30 seconds later, although Michael said it felt more like an hour, the humpback whale threw him out of his mouth and he went flying through the air.¹

Since his profound near death experience, Packard continues to dive for lobster rather than using a trap. He told Boston Public Radio, "It's the transformational power of going beneath the waves that keeps me coming back... "it gets me out of this world and into a whole other place... the sea is my peaceful place."

This true story of biblical proportion begs a question, a question fitting for Yom Kippur - What would you think about for 30 seconds if you were swallowed up by a whale? What would go through your mind?

As I heard Michael's story, my mind, like many rabbis, went immediately to Jonah. As Jews, we read about the biblical prophet Jonah on Yom Kippur afternoon. This rather humorous tale about the "runaway prophet" who gets thrown overboard and swallowed by a whale, seems an odd choice for the somber day of Yom Kippur. But I actually think the rabbis got it right thousands of years ago. On this day of introspection and reflection about our thoughts and deeds, Jonah offers a mirror into ourselves. As we look deeper into this biblical story, I invite you to consider, how Jonah is us. How we are Jonah.²

We question Jonah. Why did he run away? The mission of a prophet is to hear God's call and to respond. While there are other reluctant prophets, Jonah was the only one to flee.

The book of Jonah begins, "The word of God came to Jonah son of Amitai: Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim judgement upon it; for their wickedness has come before Me. Jonah, however, started out to flee to Tarshish away from God's service. He went down to Jaffa and found a ship going to Tarshish. He paid the fare and went aboard to sail with the others to Tarshish, away from the service of Adonai." (Jonah 1:1-3)

I would like to offer a few possible reasons for Jonah's response. The first is his own self-doubt and insecurity. In other words, Jonah suffered from a real case of "imposter syndrome." Perhaps he thought to himself, "Who am I to be a prophet? Who am I to carry out God's instruction? There are so many others who would be better."

¹ "In the Whale." Film directed by David Abel.

² *The Book of Jonah, A Social Justice Commentary*. Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz. CCAR, 2020.

Abraham Maslow, one of the twentieth century's preeminent thinkers on the human condition, devised the psychological condition known as the "Jonah complex." He writes, "We all have unused potential... It is certainly true that many of us evade our... suggested vocations... So often we run away from responsibilities... just as Jonah tried – in vain – to run away from his fate."³ Maslow believed that just as Jonah ran away, so are many of us afraid of fulfilling our life's purpose. Perhaps we fear making a commitment to a life partner, making a career move, moving to a new place, pursuing a new skill, or simply enjoying the present. We all fear something, we all carry self-doubt, and we are afraid of failure.

While there is virtue in humility, we will not survive running away from ourselves. As author Marianne Williamson beautifully wrote, "It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God."⁴ These words ring true especially on Yom Kippur. Yes, we contemplate our mistakes and shortcomings, but with the hope of forgiveness and second chances, and the intention of becoming stronger, more brilliant people.

After Jonah was thrown overboard and swallowed by a "*dag gadol*," a "huge fish," generally thought to be a whale, and then spewed out upon God's command onto dry land, the word of God came to Jonah a second time. God says, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it what I tell you." And this time the text recounts, "Jonah went at once to Nineveh in accordance with God's command." (Jonah 3:1-3)

Another possibility, and perhaps more compassionate perspective on why Jonah ran away, is that Jonah was simply exhausted. It is hard to be a prophet. It is hard to be human. When Jonah went aboard the ship to Tarshish, the first thing he did was descend into the hold of the ship, lie down, and go to sleep. Some think that Jonah suffered from depression, or what we would today call, mental health challenges. (Yanklowitz) Or maybe he was simply overwhelmed with life, struggling with his ability to cope, to engage, to function.

Haven't we all wanted to curl into a ball, to crawl back under the covers, to close our eyes, to be alone? And that is on a normal day. We also need to recognize the heightened sense of exhaustion that many of us have experienced living through a global pandemic, and still feeling the effects and impact of COVID. COVID exhaustion is real. We are still haunted by visions of empty classrooms, empty offices, empty sanctuaries. The list of fatigues rages on – Zoom fatigue, surge fatigue, decision fatigue, loneliness fatigue, family fatigue, compassion fatigue. Psychologist Dr. Betsy Stone, who has focused on pandemic trauma and burnout, writes that "we vacillate between exhaustion and exhaustion."⁵

Of course, many of us also discovered renewed blessings while hunkering down at home. Quality family time, new interests, a slower pace. Studies have shown how introverts may have fared better during the pandemic.⁶ Introverts, myself included, draw our energy from quiet

³ *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*. Abraham Maslow. 1971. (in Yanklowitz)

⁴ *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of "A Course in Miracles"*

⁵ *Refuah Shlema, Reflections on Healing and Growth*. Dr. Betsy Stone. 2022.

⁶ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/07/12/rebecca-makkai-post-pandemic-covid-introvert-extrovert/>; <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9164451/>

activities rather than interacting with crowds of people. Extroverts, who draw their energy from ongoing interactions between people, had to learn new ways to charge their batteries. For some of us, though, reentering the world post pandemic has also seemed exhausting at times. We've felt pressure to interact and perform. I smiled when our pianist, Michael, who is also a talented composer of music, told me about a song he recently wrote called, "I Miss My COVID Christmas." We Jews might say the same thing about Seder!

What can we learn from Jonah and our own need to recharge and reenter the world? In the very real state of mental health crises, this is an essential question for all of us to ask. While inside the whale, the prophet who ran away from God, had a surprising response. "And Jonah prayed to God from the belly of the whale." "*Vayitpallel Yonah*." Here is an excerpt of his prayer: "In my trouble I called to *Adonai*, and God answered me. I cried out, and You heard my voice. You cast me into the depths, into the heart of the sea, the deep engulfed me. Yet You brought my life up from the pit. When my soul was ebbing away, I called You to mind; and my prayer came before You, into Your holy Temple. And I, with a loud voice of thanksgiving, will offer to You." (Jonah 2:2-10) When at his lowest point inside the whale for three days and three nights, Jonah prays, processes his distress, and comes out with his soul uplifted and gratitude ignited.

Dr. Erica Brown in her contemporary commentary observes how rather than a prayer of remorse, Jonah's prayer is one of thanksgiving. (*The Reluctant Prophet*) This is not to say that prayer works for all of us as a way to recharge (although I would like to put in a good plug for it), but prayer does elevate our core values of gratitude, praise, peace, hope, and healing of our fractured world. When we find ourselves in distress, it will serve us well to hold onto these values.

A *midrash* suggests that the belly of the fish was like a womb in which Jonah was reborn (Malbim on Jonah). He was placed there to reflect and emerge a new man. The whale served as a sanctuary where Jonah could weather life's storms. What are your sources of healing? Where are your peaceful places to recharge and reemerge?

While the answers to these questions are deeply personal, I will share one example from my brother-in-law Aaron, who draws strength from fly fishing. He shared, "Fishing is an activity that is done alone, or alone together. In this way, it is much like the way we pass through this world. There are no guarantees that any outcome will be, other than standing knee deep in the endless passage of time hoping for a chance to catch a fish, and come face to face with another unknowable soul." It is important to give ourselves permission, like God did for Jonah, to retreat and to reengage when we are ready.

I offer one other reason for Jonah's running away. This one is more critical of Jonah. While it is important to say no and to seek balance, we cannot avoid responsibility. God called on Jonah to tell the Ninevites to repent, to change the error of their ways. When God calls us to join in repairing the world, we, unlike Jonah, must hasten to answer.

Judaism demands involvement and responsibility. We must bear witness to injustice, and take action. That is certainly the message from this morning's prophetic reading from Isaiah who does not run from God and urges his people, "This is the fast I desire: to unlock the fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free... It is to share your

bread with the hungry, and to take the poor into your house; when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to ignore your own kin.” (Jeremiah 58:6-7)

Though the challenge is daunting and we may not always feel prepared, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks reminds us, “when you feel as if you are being called to a task, if you know that the mission is necessary and important, then there is nothing you can do but say *Hineni*, ‘Here I am.’”⁷

There is a time to be alone, and there is a time to be together in community. Upon reentering our post-COVID world, our eyes have been opened to more fractures, more injustices, and more communal needs. In some ways, COVID has given us an excuse to stay home. Yet, our communities, including Temple Beth David, need our support now more than ever. And we need that personal connection, as well. I’ve heard how nice it is to watch services in pj’s at home, or while having dinner. Our technology is absolutely there for those who need it, if you are ill, have medical concerns and needs, are not able to or feel comfortable driving. But we need the rest of you to show up – to make up our weekly prayer community, *minyan*, on Shabbat, to help make lunches for homeless people once a month, to live our values of life-long learning, and to support one another in our times of joy and grief. Fearing COVID should not mean fearing community. Now is the time to reset and reemerge. Judaism teaches that “while it is not up to complete the work, neither are we free to avoid it.” (Pirkei Avot 2:16)

Be ready for new ways to engage this year with your Temple Beth David community. In addition to all our amazing programming, Rabbi Zoob and I have been talking about reinvigorating *havurot*. *Havurah*, which means a group of friends, was a model of Jewish connection in the 70s that grew out of people’s desire to connect in small groups in homes. Beth David is blessed to have several strong *havurot* who still meet regularly. In a new reiteration, I am envisioning an idea called *Mifgash*, or Encounters. The goal is to connect our growing community in closer ways. You will be able to indicate your interest in a variety of encounters such as Shabbat dinners, hiking, volunteering, studying, discussing a book, meeting at a park with other families with kids. This might be a one-time encounter, or it may evolve into a longer connection and commitment. Stay tuned for more details and let me know if you would like to help. I hope you will join in this experiment to strengthen the connections within our community. I hope you will say, “*hineini*.”

There are two questions that remain. The first is whether Jonah changed. Did he really heed God’s call? Have we? The jury is still out on Jonah. In the end, Jonah questions God’s intent all along. Compassion wins, as God forgives the people of Nineveh and does not destroy the city. In the last verses God provides Jonah with a plant to protect him from the sun, but then God provides a worm, which attacks the plant so that it withers. (Jonah 4:6-11) Distraught again, a reluctant Jonah needs yet another reminder to care for God’s creation.

And us? Perhaps we will fair better than Jonah the prophet. Yom Kippur, this fast day when we go to the depths of our souls, reminds us that we can change, we can stop running away, we can turn toward goodness. After all, the literal translation of *yonah* is “dove,” a messenger of peace

⁷ Jonathan Sacks. *Lessons in Leadership*. 2015. (In Yanklowitz)

for the world. We can hold this vision of peace in our mind's eye. Jonah is us. And we are Jonah.

Which brings us back to our last, and first question. What would you think about for 30 seconds, or 3 days and nights, if you were swallowed up by a whale? What would go through your mind? This is the question we should be thinking about today, as we contemplate the meaning of our lives.

I think Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav summed it up best when he said: "The whole world is a very narrow bridge; the essence is to not be afraid." We will walk this *gesher*, this bridge, alone and together.

(Gesher Tzar Me'od by Yosef Goldman)