

Jonah 5782/2021

Jonathan Salzedo thinks aloud about a new dramatization:

By 6pm on Yom Kippur we are weary. So why then dredge up the story of Jonah, the reluctant prophet? Clocking in at 51 verses (including the concluding verses from Micah) it is one of the longer Bible portions that we recite. On previous occasions when we have chanted it in Hebrew, it has felt like a slog, albeit a beautiful one, under the circumstances.

But having worked out a few versions of it now, I find in it a growing depth of riches. The most delightful thing is the enigma; thus it qualifies as one of our great stories. Jonah is not the first prophet to question God's methods and push back; that's a characteristic of all the Jewish prophets. But Jonah stands out as a political pragmatist. God instructs him to warn the Ninevites to turn from their evil ways; Jonah knows that this cannot succeed because they are too far gone; it will be a rough assignment; he drags his feet all the way; he enjoys some comforts at the tail end; finally events conspire against him and he is left alive, but alone, exhausted and disappointed. He also reveals his stubbornness, and it is enigmatically unclear whether he has grown at all from the experience.

Jonah is of course every-person. None of us is perfect. Each of us recognizes a reluctance to do what we know at a deep level to be the right thing. But Jonah is still successful, despite his utter lack of enthusiasm for the project. Jonah is unquestionably the right prophet for the job. He is depressed and lacks confidence, but without even trying he sways 120,000 people and turns them around with only a five word speech. One of the more efficient prophets.

I have always seen Jonah as a faithless schmuck and somewhat comical at that, and thought that God was just messing with his head, knowing exactly how this will play out, God on a roll having a hearty good time. But this year I had some different thoughts. It occurred to me that God actually loves Jonah and thus takes the trouble to integrate Jonah into an important piece of history, and guide his spiritual needs through this odd tale. It's a set of lessons, patiently laid out, each one perfectly timed, everything in place ready to go. There is a midrash about exactly when God formed the Big Fish that swallowed Jonah - apparently way back before Time, during the events preceding Creation Proper. How does Jonah succeed with his lessons? Jonah is a bad student, but obviously does get a passing grade, and surprisingly that is good enough, all that was needed.

By modern standards, the ending is dramatically weak, the kind of inconclusive movie ending that is very difficult to pull off. What happened? You may want to yell at the author for just dropping the story at the critical moment. Jonah should have had an answer to God's final message. Was God even rebuking him, or was it just a reminder to Jonah: you've got something going on, what are you going to do with it now?

The timeless words from Micah close out the drama:

Who is like You, forgiving the errors of the remnant?

God does not remain angry, delights in mercy, casts our sins into the sea;

Grants truth to Jacob, kindness to Abraham, as sworn to our ancestors, in days of old.

And now, relax and enjoy our new rendering of the tale ...