

Yom Kippur 2019/5780

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“Dormez Vous”?

I.

Ben Adam, mah l'cha nirdam? Human being, why are you sound asleep?

Kum, k'ra batachanunim! Get up! Call out with great pleading!

Sh'foch sichah! Pour out your words! D'rosh s'lichah mei-adon ha'adonim! Ask forgiveness from the Master of All!

This is a *piyut*, a liturgical poem written specifically for the *Selichot* service, the service for the Saturday night preceding the new year. It was composed in the 11th Century by Rabbi Yehuda ibn Bil'am of Sivilia, Spain. Rabbi ibn Bil'am was a Biblical grammarian and commentator. That's all I know about him, though given his context I can guess that he was living at the dawning of the great Jewish spiritual awakening that became the Age of the Zohar.

Listen to it again, first in English, and then in the Hebrew, and listen for the wordplay:

Human being, why are you sound asleep? Get up! Call out with great pleading!

Pour out your words! Ask forgiveness from the Master of All!

Ben Adam, mah l'cha nirdam? Kum, k'ra batachanunim! Sh'foch sichah! D'rosh s'lichah mei-adon ha'adonim!

“Adam” and “nirdam.” Human being, deep in hibernation. “Sichah” and “s’lichah.” The precise words with which to articulate forgiveness. “Adon” and “adonim.” Human masters reflecting the will – or resisting the will – of the Master of Time and Space.

I am grateful to Professor Melila Hellner Eshed of the Hartman Institute and Hebrew University for uncovering this gem. Nowhere else have I seen a liturgical piece for the Days of Awe borrowing so creatively from the core imagery of the Book of Jonah.

Tomorrow afternoon we will of course hear that quirky book of the Bible, just before we enter the service that closes the gates of repentance. Jonah marks one pole of Yom Kippur. Jonah receives a divine call. He is told to go and preach

repentance to a morally corrupt society, namely Nineveh. Nineveh is a superpower of the ancient Near East, but it is nonetheless a corrosive force in the world. Jonah, a Jew, is given the opportunity to bring Jewish conscience to bear on the larger human stage.

Jonah runs in the other direction. God's command is "*kum*" – "get up" and go to Nineveh. Instead he "*vayakom*" – he "up" and catches a boat out of the country, "away from God's presence," if such a thing is possible.

He hides in the belly of the boat. A storm surges. The sailors are scared to death. They each pray to their respective gods – an interesting early case of religious pluralism. The captain, noticing Jonah missing, storms down to the hold and tries to awaken Jonah. He yells, "*Mah l'cha nirdam!*" Why are you sound asleep!

We all know the famous part of the story where Jonah is hurled from the boat and ends up in the belly of the great fish. That, too, is no doubt a metaphor for hiding from the call of society and responsibility.

But it is this very first scene, when Jonah is still in the boat, still available to respond to the captain's call, that sets the tone for the period immediately following the end of our Yom Kippur. For it is in those first hours and minutes after the holy day concludes that we have the greatest chance to translate what

we've learned on Yom Kippur into personal and social action; and it is in those first hours that we are most vulnerable to sliding back into the pathetic beliefs and behaviors that imprison us.

Right after Yom Kippur, when we are at our most aware of the values, responsibilities, and expectations of us as serious Jews – right then is the time when we could really live up to our potential as Jewish individuals and as a Jewish people. And that's when we hurry home, grab a bagel (and a piece of babke and a slice of challah, of course!), roll over, and go back to sleep. Back to being "*nirdam*," which gives to modern Hebrew the word for hibernation, *tardemah*.

II.

So if Jonah is one pole of Yom Kippur, what is the other? The other is the Haftarah reading for the morning of Yom Kippur day. It is the stirring, hyper-political passage from Isaiah 57 and 58.

The Isaiah speaking to us here is not the 8th-Century BCE prophet living in Jerusalem and calling his king and fellow blue bloods to task for their moral turpitude.

This is Isaiah of the Exile, the preacher to the Jews of 6th-Century BCE Babylonia who desperately need a jolt of hope and confidence if they are ever to return to

their devastated homeland and start over. What does our Isaiah say to them?

Not “hey guys, you can ace this! This is a piece of cake for you folks!”

Rather, he decides to dig up the worst of the calumnies that brought down Judea in the first place. Judeans had mastered the art of statecraft, but not the ethics of creating a moral state. Their ruling class had prospered, but their masses had suffered abuse, neglect, poverty, and worst of all, injustice, both legal and social. Judean society in no way resembled the dream the Torah had dreamt for them. Their exile was as much a rotting from within as a conquering from without.

Our Isaiah tells them, “*Solu solu* - Clear a thoroughfare; remove the stumbling block from my people’s way.” What is the “stumbling block?” The jaded thinking that no alternative exists to a society void of compassion.

He continues: “As for the downtrodden and destitute, I shall revive the spirit of the lowly, and the heart of the depressed I shall restore.” “Revive the spirit?” Indeed, as in “wake people up from a death sleep.” Our prophet tells his fellow exiles that their problem is not one of location. Yes, they are in Babylonia, six-hundred miles from Jerusalem. But they could go back home in an instant if it weren’t for the fact that they are a million miles from grasping the meaning of their collective problem. Their problem is that when they had their own state in

their own land, they never even saw the downtrodden in their midst, much less did they care about restoring them to their humanity.

Nonetheless, the Jews of 586 BCE had apparently never let their precious sacrificial system fall into disrepair, ironically enough. They had consistently commemorated each holy day and regular day and its requisite offerings, including and especially the great fast of Yom Kippur. To which our Isaiah famously snarls:

“Is this the fast I delight in? A fast merely to deprive one’s body? Is it bowing the head like the willows, or reclining in sackcloth and ash? Do you call that a fast?”
hakazeh yihyeh tzom evchareihu?!”

That four-word Hebrew phrase should be memorized by every Jew, just as we all memorize the six words of the *Sh’ma*. *hakazeh yihyeh tzom evchareihu*. “Is this the fast I would choose?”

That phrase should be the measuring stick of every action we take, every policy we enact, every program we institute, every school and shul we build, and every dime we spend. Everything should measure up to that lion’s roar of a question.

III.

How did we end up with these two odd Haftarot for Yom Kippur? How old is this tradition? Who came up with it?

Tractate *Megillah* 31a of the Babylonian Talmud gives us a list of every Torah and Haftarah reading for every holy day in the calendar. That discussion probably dates to 3rd-4th-Century Babylonia, so 1800 years ago. When the conversation gets to Rosh Hashanah, it reflects a debate between the Sages over precisely what should be read. There were several competing practices. One tradition is the one we follow, namely the birth of Isaac on day one, and the binding of Isaac on day two. But for Yom Kippur, it merely tells us to read the scapegoat section from the Torah and the Isaiah in the morning, and the forbidden sexual relations and Jonah in the afternoon. No explanation.

Rashi, in his commentary on the Talmud, offers a simple gloss on the choice of the Isaiah. He says this: “For it proclaims, ‘*solu solu* - clear a path, clear a path’ which speaks of the “*middah*” of *teshuvah*, the moral behavioral trait of repentance.”

And then Rashi quotes our verse: *hakazeh yihyeh tzom evchareihu* – “Is this the fast I would choose” – as if to say that this phrase alone makes the entire point.

This phrase alone is reason enough to read the selection. This phrase alone

contains the entire message of Yom Kippur, the entire guide to *teshuvah*! As if to say, *teshuvah* is not primarily the contemplation of our private deeds, moods, broodings, shortcomings, failures, et cetera, though it is that at some level. Rather, *teshuvah* is getting ourselves and our fellow Jews to be *collectively* ethical, and to espouse that collective ethics outward to the world at large. In Isaiah's words,

“the unlocking of the chains of wickedness, the loosening of exploitation, the freeing of all those oppressed, the breaking of the yoke of servitude; the sharing of your bread with those who starve, the bringing of the wretched poor into your house, or clothing someone you see who is naked, and not hiding from your kin in their need.”

All concepts easily translated into any age and any circumstance. A Yom Kippur sermon for the ages! Thank you, Rashi!

I wish that either the Talmud or Rashi would bother to explain why they want us to read Jonah right before we close the gates of Yom Kippur, but they do not.

However, a comment in the Mishnah gives us a clue. It's in the tractate *Ta'anit*, where public fasts are discussed. And here again, the ancient Rabbis don't seem interested in any one person's shortcomings. In chapter 2, Mishnah 1, they

describe a ceremony of taking the holy ark into the public square. They put ashes on the ark and on the magistrate of the court, and everyone puts ashes on their own heads. Whereupon the elder of the town says, "*Acheinu*, brothers, in the Book of Jonah it does not say of the people of Nineveh, 'And God saw their sackcloth and their fasting,' but 'And God saw their deeds, for they turned from their evil way.' And the Prophets say, 'And rend your heart and not your garments.'" End quote from the Mishnah.

IV.

Do you see where this is leading? I grew up in a Jewish environment that was turning gradually from Classical Reform toward Zionist, Kaplan-influenced Liberal Judaism. In our synagogue, we still heard the Classical message on Yom Kippur: God, according to Isaiah, does not want ritual; rather, God wants moral behavior.

But the Mishnah is clear: God does "want" us to fast publicly and put ashes on our heads – i.e., to perform penitential rituals – but God wants us to realize that the rituals are not what God ultimately "wants." God does indeed want moral behavior, but God wants us to get there through the exercises and practices that could just as easily lead us away from morality and toward the idolatrous worship of those very same rituals. Toward the idolatrous worship of our traditions and

customs, our ethnic identity and our quaint practices. Toward idolatrous use of ritual as a *displacement* for the serious, searing conversation we need to have about the lack of justice and compassion in *our* society and in our collective institutions.

By choosing these discomfoting readings for our Yom Kippur ritual, the Rabbis are implying – actually declaring – that God wants us to wake up to our *avoidance behavior*. God wants us to wake up, period. And if Isaiah can't get us out of our denial, maybe Jonah can get us out of our stupor.

We *are* Jonah, not in the dreamlike fish, and not beneath the withering gourd, but in the disgraceful bowels of the boat. The captain is Isaiah, who comes storming down into the hold to shake us, to yell in our face, to get us to come up on deck and confront our demanding God head on. To quit hiding like Adam in the bushes of the Garden of Eden. To come out once and for all and answer the question, *ayeka* – “Where are you?” Where are you, indeed! Fasting? Really? You call that a fast? Is that the fast I would choose? *hakazeh yihyeh tzom evchareihu?*

V.

Tomorrow, when we read the morning and afternoon Haftaret, let's agree to stop enjoying these texts as quaint quotations from our cultural backdrop. Let's let the

words cut right to the heart. Let's let them speak to us today, about today. Let's wake each other up.

Let's go from this Yom Kippur back out into life, demanding better of ourselves, of our leaders, of our followers, of all of us lurching like that boat as it sails away from the Godly call. Let's try to show both God and ourselves – and especially our children - that we can fast like *menschen*, and that we can use our fast to lead us toward lifting up the sanctity, the *kedushah*, the fleeting opportunity, of this beautiful, storm-tossed world.

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