

Jonah: A Tale of Two Tseuvahs

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Every Yom Kippur our Tradition brings us face to face with the Book of Jonah. In many ways it is one of the most enigmatic books in the Tanach. Dated by some as having been written as early as the eight century bc, it is placed in the Biblical canon among the prophets or Neveim. More specifically, Jonah is found among the 12 minor prophets which include prophets such as Hosea, Micah and Amos. However, it is clear from the get go that the Book of Jonah is not like any of these prophetic books in either form or content. Content wise, in no other prophetic book does a prophet flagrantly reject a divine directive as Jonah does. Further, the focus of most of the classic prophetic texts is expressing God's disappointment or rage at Israel's rejection of the covenant either in terms of worshipping other gods or ignoring the plight of the widow and orphan. Needless to say, none of these issues are broached in any significant way in the Book of Jonah.

In terms of its form, the Book of Jonah is also sui generis certainly among the 12 minor prophets; Jonah is a third person narrative—much like the narratives in Kings or Samuel or some of the Writings such as the Book of Ruth or Esther-- while all the other minor prophets are poetic works; works which use biblical parallelism and elaborate metaphors to convey God's voice.

Many commentators recognize that the Book of Jonah may be enigmatic among prophetic books, but argue it is particularly well suited for Yom Kippur since affirms the efficacy of prayer and the possibility of meaningful Repentance. However, when it comes

to the subjects of Repentance and prayer –in fact, the Book of Jonah actually tells two very different stories.

There is the Nineveh Storyline where repentance and prayer work without a glitch. In the Nineveh narrative God directs Jonah to prophesize to the people of Nineveh that unless they repent their evil ways their city will be destroyed in forty days. When Jonah issues that prophesy, Nineveh is immediately galvanized into sincere repentance. The people of Nineveh at the direction of their King fast, sit in ashes and wear sackcloth for forty days. And then just as unequivocally, God accepts Nineveh’s repentance and the City is redeemed. In this Nineveh storyline, sin, repentance and redemption follow one from the next as simply as dominos falling in a line. This idealistic portrait of the Tseuvah was not lost on the Rabbis. Maimonides in his Mishnah Torah states directly that Nineveh is the model for people of Israel as to how repentance should be done.

However, while the redemption of Nineveh may be what we remember as the central narrative in the Book of Jonah, it is certainly not its focus. Indeed, one might argue that the Torah seems to undercut and perhaps even poke fun at the simplicity of the Nineveh narrative. To begin with, any reader of the bible who is used to reading the long poetic orations of the Prophets as well as the description of Israel’s persistent disregard of those prophesies, is likely to see more than a little intended humor in the Torah’s description of Jonah’s single sentence prophecy and its immediate efficacy. Jonah’s entire prophesy to Nineveh is actually composed of only the following sentence: “forty more days and the City will be overturned”. That single sentence galvanizes the great City of Nineveh—the capital of Assyria— and its King to immediate Tseuvah.

Further, possibly the clearest evidence that the Torah wants to direct us to look beyond the Nineveh narrative is that all of the human conflict and suspense in the Book of Jonah occurs elsewhere. It is in the storyline of Jonah's Journey—not the repentance of Nineveh--that a prophet defies a divine directive, is thrown overboard into a raging storm, is swallowed by a whale and spewed back onto land. It is also part of Jonah's Journey—well after Nineveh has repented and been saved--that God provides Jonah a personalized lesson in compassion through his shriveling of the plant that provided Jonah shade.

So if the Torah wants us to focus on Jonah's Journey and not the repentance of Nineveh, how does that Journey narrative portray prayer and tseuvah? The best short answer to that question is "its complicated". In Jonah's journey—in place of the immediate recognition of misconduct found in the Nineveh story, the Torah summons significant literary effort in describing the depth of Jonah's flight from Nineveh. The verses describing Jonah's flight repeat the verb Yarod generally meaning to go down four times to describe Jonah fleeing from God's directive: Jonah goes down to the port city of Yaffo "Yarod Yaffo"; he goes down to the boat "Yarod Bah"; he goes down to the bottom of the boat "Yarod Yarkedei Hasifeena"; and he goes to sleep VaYehradom. The repetition of the same root verb meaning to descend in four different ways emphasizes that while there are different phases to his descent—the running away from Nineveh, the descent to the ship; the hiding at the bottom of the boat and then Jonah's deep sleep in the boat are all part of one larger physical and emotional descent.

Once the Torah does eventually describe Jonah's prayer for repentance in the belly of the whale it is pretty clear that the tefilla misses the mark; Jonah never addresses

his lack of compassion for the people of Nineveh—and for wrongdoers in general-- which is at the core of his sinful conduct. All Jonah seems to do in his prayer is thank God for not letting the waters destroy him and promise that he will make thanksgiving to God. Jonah says:

In my trouble I called to the Lord, and He answered me; From the belly of Sheol I cried out, You cast me into the depths, Into the heart of the sea, The floods engulfed me; All Your breakers and billows swept over me, I thought I was driven away out of your sight; Would I ever gaze again upon Your holy temple? Yet You brought my life up from the pit”

Needless to say, the subject of God’s compassion for others who have sinned and repented—the issue that drove Jonah from God in the first place—is never mentioned in Jonah’s prayer.

As the narrative continues it only becomes clearer that Jonah has made no meaningful tseuvah. After God redeems the city of Nineveh Jonah cries out to God enraged asking to be killed because he cannot tolerate life where sinners are permitted repent. Jonah admits in a moment of true emotion—that Jonah’s opposition to God’s compassion is why he fled from the directive to prophesy to Nineveh in the first place.

Finally, at the very end of the Book of Jonah, even after God attempts to teach Jonah compassion by shriveling the plant that provided Jonah comfort and shade, it is never clear that this lesson caused Jonah to repent his opposition to divine compassion. Indeed, as if to make the absence of clear tseuvah absolutely clear, the Torah ends the

book of Jonah with a question. The last line of the book of Jonah is a rhetorical question from God to Jonah as follows:

“You cared about the plant, which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight, And should not I care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left and many beasts as well?”

So in direct contrast to the Nineveh Storyline, where sin is immediately acknowledged and where prayer precisely addresses the sinful conduct; the storyline of Jonah’s Journey focuses on the physical and emotional flight away from any acknowledgement of sin; prayer which avoids any recognition of the sin which drove the misconduct in the first place and a steadfast refusal to admit the central personal failings at issue even in the face of God’s elaborate moral teaching.

There is little question that the Rabbis struggled with the equivocal portrait of Jonah’s tefilla and repentance. Significantly, the Rabbis were unwilling to end the reading on Yom Kippur afternoon with the unanswered question that ends the Book of Jonah. So, after directing the reading of the entire book of Jonah the Tradition also compels a reading from the book of Micah. The substance of the reading from Micah is a fascinating insight to Rabbis recognition of the limitations of Jonah’s prayer and tseuvah.

The reading from Micah unequivocally extols God’s compassion. Micah says:

“Who is a God like You forgiving iniquity and remitting transgression; who has not maintained His wrath forever against the remnant of His own people, Because He loves graciousness He will take us back in love”

In many ways, this reading from Micah is the answer to the rhetorical question God poses to Jonah at the end of the book of Jonah but which Jonah never answers. It is very much the response the Rabbis would have wanted Jonah to give. Since it did not exist in the Book of Jonah, the Rabbis creatively grafted it on to the end of Jonah from another prophetic text--from the Book of Micah. Of course, the substance of the selected reading from Micah is not only the answer Jonah should have given to God’s question at the end of the Book of Jonah but it is also the prayer Jonah should have said in the belly of the whale; Jonah should have prayed to God recognizing the importance of God’s compassion— and not merely thanking him for saving his life in a raging storm. Micah’s words would have been true tefilla appropriate to Jonah’s sin, but which never appears in the book itself.

So all of this discussion really begs the question: why two conflicting stories about prayer and Tseuvah—one where the central character runs from sin and never truly repents; and one where an entire city repents after only a solitary sentence of admonition?

One possible answer is that the Torah wants us to see both the ideal and reality of tefilla and repentance. The ideal is as simple to state as the storyline of the Nineveh narrative itself, however, the reality for most of us of running from our limitations, never quite facing them nor quite achieving change is a process as complex as Jonah’s Journey. However, personally until this last year, there was an aspect

of Jonah's Journey I could never comprehend. For sure, the Nineveh narrative always seemed like an idealized portrait of prayer, repentance and divine action. However, I always stumbled on the idea that anyone much less a prophet would be willing to die rather than accept the notion that Nineveh might be entitled to redemption. Indeed, the idea that Jonah would be willing to risk not only his own life, but also the lives of others over such a seemingly non controversial issue seemed to be very much outside any reality I ever experienced.

However, my understanding of this particular window of Torah began to change this year. Over the last several years now I have watched as the effects of dementia slowly but materially diminished the capacity of my loving father. A man of enormous vibrancy, affection and intellect; a man who always sought to engage people on a real level, to learn and understand not only their joys but their struggles as well to often offer help either professionally as an attorney, as a dedicated friend or loving family member. However, this unrelenting disease forced him to begin to lose many of the critical verbal and mental functions that enabled him to be who he was; that defined him for himself and for others. To most of his family the choice of getting medical attention years ago when the symptoms became apparent seemed very uncontroversial. However, for someone who had been so in control; so dynamic in the world; getting such help or even admitting he had a problem was an impossibility. He at times ran from the disease physically by staying away from the family that so desperately wanted to help him; ran from the disease emotionally by never allowing anyone to speak of it; and eventually the disease achieved the ultimate escape by precluding him from consciously understanding his diminished capacity in any meaningful way. Of course, to the family who loves him, this

steadfast refusal to acknowledge and address the illness was difficult to comprehend. What was another pill or doctor's appointment? Why such profound resistance? In many ways, we were forced to become like the sailors on Jonah's ship, thrashing about in a storm that was not of our own making and that we could not understand.

However, in many ways my father's greatest strengths—his intense and creative verbal life—and even the prospect of their diminution may well have also been the greatest barriers to confronting the illness that plagues him. I now imagine Jonah the same way. Perhaps his greatest strength as a prophet was his standard for justice, his discernment of injustice and opposition to sin. Perhaps Jonah's ability to see injustice so clearly shaped not only how he viewed the world, but also how he defined himself. From this perspective, the redemption of Nineveh was an impossibility for Jonah because it undermined what defined him. God's forgiveness of Nineveh became for Jonah the destruction of much of what he knew both of the world and himself. Despite all God's efforts it was a lesson Jonah simply could not afford to learn; it was a lesson that came at too great a cost.

This message in Jonah's Journey—that Tseuvah may be so hard for us because it perhaps forces us to question much of what defines us; what has allowed us to be who we are in the world—may have some broader resonance for many of us. Much of the stress we have felt with family, friends and co workers over the past year may be traced back to parts of ourselves that we see as our strengths. For those of us for whom relationships are primary, that strength may preclude connections or create frictions with those whose focus is elsewhere. For those of us who focus heavily on our work, that concentration may limit or impair opportunities to create or enhance our relationships. As with Jonah,

are self defining strengths become the steep and often insurmountable barriers to tseuvah; to the repair that is supposed to go on during these Yamem Noraim.

So in the Book of Jonah the Torah has intertwined to very different and even conflicting narratives about prayer and Tseuvah. The Nineveh narrative presents the ideal of how we and God would wish repentance to work; while Jonah's Journey recognizes that our self defining strengths may also well be both the source of our limitations and barriers to tseuvah. Read this way, possibly God's most compassionate act in the Book of Jonah becomes not His redemption of Nineveh-- since their repentance was perfect--but rather God's redemption of Jonah whose tefilla never addressed his sin and who never completely repented. The power of the Torah having us read the Book of Jonah on Yom Kippur may well lie in it's tacit assurance, as derived from Jonah's Journey, that redemption and change is possible even though many of us, like Jonah, may well end this Yom Kippur without having uttered the precise tefilla needed to address our failings and without having achieved the complete tseuvah attained by the great city of Nineveh. May we all strive toward the ideals of Nineveh's prayer and repentance with the understanding that that path may well be as long and as challenging as Jonah's Journey.

Gamar Hatimah Tovah and Shana Tova.