

The Book of Jonah

Laura Rotter, Yom Kippur, October 2008

The book of Jonah, one of the shortest of the biblical texts that make up what we call the tanach (torah, neviim and ketubim or the torah, prophets and writings) is also in many ways one of the most difficult to understand. It reads like a simple story, and yet it deals with complex issues of: evil and the possibility of teshuvah (repentance); the responsibility of Jews to Gentiles, and the reconciliation of justice and mercy in both human and divine relationships...OH...and LARGE FISH!!!!!!!

So much to deal with and ponder when reading Sefer Yonah and yet I got stuck on the opening pasuk, the opening sentence:

“And the word of Hashem came to Jonah, son of Amitai.” What does it mean for Jonah to hear the voice of Hashem, the voice of G-d? How can we be, like Jonah, close enough to G-d to hear His voice?

Each week we ask ourselves, as a community, in our zecher l'musaf,

“We have sought your closeness, O G-d, how shall we draw near?”

We are all here today, on Yom Kippur, seeking to hear G-d's voice, searching for meaning in our lives both personally, and as a community. And, like Jonah, we are balancing the tension between our individual needs and beliefs, and wanting to connect with something greater than ourselves.

For what does Jonah do after he hears G-d's request of him to go to the city of Nineveh and “cry out” to her?

“And Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from before G-d's Presence.”

“Everyone flees from the presence of G-d; no one wants to stand in His presence,” states the Vilna Gaon in his allegorical commentary on the Book of Yonah. WE ARE ALL JONAHS, IN A WAY THE VILNA GAON COULDN'T HAVE FORESEEN, IN THIS MODERN AGE OF CHOICE AND FREEDOM, THIS TIME OF “VOLUNTARY COVENANT.”

Jonah hears the word of G-d, but he refuses to listen; he refuses to preach repentance to Ninveh. He responds instead to his own voice. He is a law-and-order man who adheres to strict principles

of justice, and he does not believe it is appropriate to allow a city as evil as Nineveh the possibility of teshuvah and redemption. A contemporary Rabbi, Rav Meir Levin, commenting on Jonah's anguish when G-d ultimately accepts Nineveh's tshuvah and relents from destroying the city, writes, "Yonah could not agree with the manner by which G-d conducted His world...Yonah could not abide the Attribute of Mercy. This prophet would have much preferred a world just a bit more organized, more certain and predictable, a world where the wicked suffer certain retribution and the right receive immediate reward – a world that functioned more according to the rules and without the redundancies and paradoxes that are found all around us. IN THIS WAY, JONAH IS PERHAPS LIKE MANY OF US TODAY. WE'RE OPEN TO FOLLOWING THE "WORD OF GOD," BUT IF IT OFFENDS OUR SENSIBILITIES, OUR INDIVIDUAL SENSE OF HOW TO CONDUCT OUR LIVES, WE FEEL WE CAN OPT OUT, OR QUESTION WHETHER IT IS TRULY THE WORD OF G-D.

Perhaps we can turn this story of Jonah's fleeing from G-d on its head, and use it to begin to define what a relationship with G-d can mean. Perhaps Jonah is upset with G-d's mercy, not because it allows the people of Ninveh to repent, but because it allows them to repent only for the purpose of staying alive. For Jonah feels that averting destruction is merely a first step to a higher life, to a loving relationship with hashem. That the final goal of all of this is, beyond even service, intimate friendship with G-d.

According to Dr. T.A. Perry, the author of "The Honeymoon is Over, Jonah's argument with G-d." "far from hating the Ninevites out of some exclusive love for the Israelites, Jonah – the prophet to the Gentiles – hopes for their complete restoration, one which would include not only mere existence but much more as well. For is it not more probable that Jonah, far from the usual view that he is an Israelite exclusivist, projects Dveykut – the soul's ardent clinging to G-d – as a universal possibility?

Yet, how do we achieve this dveyket, this cleaving, this intimate friendship with G-d? And what does that mean?

An answer may be found in the story of Yonah's attempted flight to Tarshish.

"He went down to Yaffo and found a Tarshish-bound ship; he paid its fare and boarded it to travel with them to Tarshish before Hashem's presence." Why does the *ôñâ÷* say "*ôîâî*", "with them"? Isn't it self-evident that Yonah is traveling with the ship's crew? Isn't this term superfluous? Rav Meir Levin riffs off of this word *ôîâî*, describing a commitment on the part of Yonah to be "with" the sailors, to approach them as the tzaddik he was, with love in his heart. And this choice to be "*ôîâî*", to be with them, must have been very powerful. For even at a time of great danger to their lives, the sailors evidence concern for Yonah, a sense of loyalty or devotion.

Yonah said to the sailors: “Pick me up and heave me into the sea and the sea will calm down for you for I know that it is because of me that this terrible storm is upon you.” Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to return to the shore.

“But they could not, because the sea was growing stormier upon them.” What is important in this story is the relationship between Yonah and the sailors and, through this relationship, the impact Yonah had upon their behavior.

Martin Buber, in his essay whose title is translated as “I and Thou”, writes that we come to G-d through the human ties within which we have been set. As stated in the prologue to the translation of “I and Thou” by Walter Kaufmann, “the central stress (in Buber’s book) falls on You – not Thou. G-d is present when I confront You. But if I look away from You, I ignore him. As long as I merely experience or use you, I deny G-d. But when I encounter You I encounter Him.”

Buber’s essay is an attempt to endow the social sphere with a religious dimension. According to Kaufmann, “The place of the sacred is not a house of G-d, no church, synagogue or seminary, nor one day in seven, and the span of the sacred is much shorter than twenty-four hours. The Sabbath is every day, several times a day.” Every time we encounter another human being, we encounter G-d.

What exactly does it mean to listen to G-d, asks Rabbi Binny Friedman? Each of us has an inner voice, which really is a manifestation of Hashem inside each and every one of us. Do we hear that voice? Do we listen to it? And even more, do we hear the voice that cries out from inside every human being? After all, if I cannot see a little bit of G-d inside the person standing next to me, I will never find G-d anywhere else....

And how do we sensitize ourselves to see G-d in the other, and to hear his voice in our day-to-day lives? For me, it’s through the daily practice of mitzvot and the awareness that brings.

I’d like to share a beautiful d’var torah, written by Rabbi Danny Nevins of JTS, that addresses the effort required to cultivate religious awareness. He quotes a verse in Chapter 13 of Sefer Dvarim:

Walk after the Lord your G-d

Revere G-d

Guard G-d’s commands

Listen for G-d's voice

Serve G-d

Cling to G-d

The first stage in cultivating faith is to make a decision to act differently – to walk after G-d. This means relinquishing some of our autonomy and seeking to satisfy a Higher will. To quote Rabbi Nevins, “As the mitzvot become integrated into our daily life, we become ready for a spiritual breakthrough. At this point can we begin to listen for the Voice. Mitzvah consciousness seeps into our daily routines, affecting our habits, our relationships, our homes and offices. G-d's voice becomes audible through the mitzvot.”

Though it may seem that our freedom is restricted by taking upon ourselves these obligations, “there are all different kinds of freedom,” according to writer David Foster Wallace, and the kind that is most precious you will not hear much talked about in the great outside world of winning and achieving and displaying. The really important kind of freedom involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day. That is real freedom.” AND THIS, I BELIEVE, IS WHAT G-D WAS SAYING TO JONAH.

May we come to understand this Yom Kippur that the path to meaning in our personal lives may be reached by connecting with something greater than ourselves, and, as we approach Ne'ila, through the intermingling of our individual t'fillot, our individual, private yearnings and desires with the communal t'fillot, the t'fillot passed down from generation to generation that represent the collective hopes, aspirations, failings and pains of all Clal Yisrael.

I'd like to conclude with the comments of Mordechai Beck, a Jerusalem-based writer and artist and Bet Am Shalom craft's fair participant. “To a generation which is searching for both independence and meaning, the book of Jonah is as relevant as was the Book of Job to the generation that passed through the traumas of the Holocaust...we, the viewers, have become Jonah. We can flee or we can stay. Emerging from the belly of the fish into the light of day, we are forced to realize that the land of Tarshish is reached – if ever – only through the gates of Nineveh.”