

## **Yom Kippur**

Gail Simmons October 4, 2014

Good afternoon – Ordinarily I would not start a d’var Torah with a baseball metaphor in the presence of so many for whom this is an art form, but since the only team I ever root for, the Pirates, made it further this season than the local BAS-approved heroes, I want to say that it’s such a privilege to be batting in the bottom of the 9<sup>th</sup> inning today, and I want to thank the members of the Ritual Committee for inviting me to see if I can hit one over the fence, or at least out of the tent.

But when I started to contemplate the task set before me, I wasn’t sure I would ever get out of the dugout. I have often found the story in the Book of Jonah to be a bit childish, or maybe even silly. When I think of the Book of Jonah, I find myself thinking of a cartoon image from my childhood: a wild-haired guy in a tattered robe and sandals, carrying a sign that reads “The End is Near”. Images like this one were a staple of the 60s Cold War mentality. As I was growing up, it often seemed that some crazy Jonah-like character was out there proclaiming that destruction was imminent. Everyone who was sane, knew he was wrong, except that the constant threat of nuclear annihilation could make one wonder if maybe he was right.

Prophets of Doom, as Jonah was, are a regular feature of our world, as of the world of our ancestors. In fact, one could argue that much of the Tanakh is a long series of Prophets of Doom – prophets who foretell the Exile, the destruction of the Temple, the loss of God’s grace. And as the cartoon images often express, such prophets are often viewed with derision by those around them. We are frankly amused by stories of cults who await the Apocalypse, and often horrified when groups of people commit mass suicide, or murder, because of their belief that The End Is Near. Yet the inclusion of the Book of Jonah near the end of the Yom Kippur liturgy suggests that the Rabbis took him quite seriously, and as I have discovered they are not the only ones who do so.

Shortly after I agreed to deliver this drash, I saw a headline concerning the destruction by the terrorist group ISIS of the Tomb of Jonah in the Iraqi city of Mosul. Now, Mosul is the historic site of Nineveh, the very city saved from destruction by Jonah’s prophecy. This headline made me curious, and after a little research I discovered that many other cities also have a claim on Jonah’s tomb: Gath-hepher in Galilee; Halhul in the West Bank, north of Hebron; Sarafand in Lebanon. It seems that there are many locations around the Middle East that celebrate being the resting place of Jonah. I further learned that the Quran recounts the story of Jonah in a similar, but not identical fashion to that found in the Book of Jonah, and that Jonah is the only one of the 12 minor prophets of the Tanakh

mentioned in the Quran. Digging further, I learned that Jesus refers to the story of Jonah in the Gospel of Matthew.

So if characters like Jonah are so often the subject of ridicule, why are so many cities eager to be known as the site of his Tomb? Why do all three Abrahamic religions make his story part of the Canon? If Jonah is such a schlump, why is he so popular?

Jonah is the most reluctant and unlikely of prophets. First of all, one has to question his faith in the universality of the God of Israel – on hearing the call to prophecy, he promptly runs away, somehow imagining that getting out of town can save him from God’s assignment. He flees by water, heading west. Yet he isn’t long out to sea when trouble arises in the form of a terrible storm. And what does he do? He tries to hide in bed! He somehow imagines that he can sleep through the raging wind and rain, that somehow when he awakes the storm will have passed. But it is the agency of his fellow travelers – the captain of the ship, and the sailors – that drags him back into the thick of things.

In many ways the sailors are more inspiring people than Jonah. They may not be followers of Adonai but they clearly acknowledge his power, and they work hard to be sure that even as they identify Jonah as the party responsible for the storm, they do not offend Jonah’s god by throwing him overboard. They act more ethically than Jonah did – after all, he put them in harm’s way without a second thought by coming aboard their ship, but they are clearly concerned not to sin.

It takes a great deal of terror before Jonah is finally persuaded to assume his prophetic responsibility. He is thrown overboard in the midst of a raging storm, swallowed by a giant fish, stuck in the darkness (not to mention the digestive processes) of the fish for days. Finally, after praising God for keeping him alive, he is disgorged, sick and dehydrated and exhausted – only to face the task at hand. Seemingly cowed into obedience, he listens to God’s directive, goes to Nineveh, and proclaims their Doom.

Once he takes up his task, Jonah is in fact a success – his prophecy is heeded, the citizens of Nineveh repent, and God spares them from annihilation. But Jonah is not truly repentant. He cannot accept God’s giving Nineveh a reprieve on any form of punishment, and he becomes petulant about the trivial comforts afforded by the shade plant that God provides for him. He seems to be a bit of a drama queen, declaring to God that he would be “better off dead” when God lets Nineveh off the hook, and then again when God lets the plant die. The same Jonah who was so relieved to be alive in the belly of the fish is now wishing for his own death. Jonah hardly seems like a role model of a great prophet – not exactly cut from the same cloth as Elijah or Jeremiah or one of the other top prophets of our

tradition. So why are we supposed to pay attention to Jonah this afternoon, as our repentance reaches its climax?

Jonah, it seems, has a bit of an ego, and a number of classical scholars (including Saadiah Gaon, Rashi, David Kimhi and Abravanel) see his outrage at having to prophesy Doom as anger and embarrassment at the fact that he will get no credit, and in fact possibly be made to look like a false prophet when God forgives the Ninevites and saves them. As the Book says “and the people of Nineveh believed God” -- not “believed Jonah” -- so it seems that Jonah is right -- he won’t even get a shout-out from the people he helped to save. And here is where I begin to see a striking parallel between Jonah’s behavior, and the lives of many of us who pray here this afternoon.

Any of us who have ever been a leader, a friend, or a parent, know how Jonah feels. When we find ourselves in the position of having to tell someone, or an entire group, that bad times are ahead if ways don’t change, we are in a no-win situation. “If you don’t plan better, this project will fail.” “If you don’t get better grades, you won’t get into the college of your choice.” “If you don’t stop smoking, you will get sick.” When we are the Prophet of Doom and are not listened to, and bad things happen, it is easy to sit and say “I told you so” (and in fact, we are all susceptible to Schadenfreude at those moments) but this seldom gives us, the Prophets of Doom, any credibility. When people do listen to us, it often appears that the credit for their change of heart is given to some other agency – to their own good sense, or “good fortune”, or perhaps even God. When people make changes and are saved from bad decisions they seldom acknowledge the source of the inspiration – and that is one of the things that can make leadership, or friendship, or parenthood, a hard path to follow.

So hard, in fact, that Jonah (who seems to know in advance what will happen, because he knows of the merciful attributes of God that we have repeated many times today) does everything he can to avoid taking up the leadership challenge. He runs, he hides, he throws a tantrum. He even tries to argue God out of being the merciful being that God is, just to make a point. Yet in the end, Jonah submits to God’s call. Jonah delivers.

So why do our sages place the reading of the Story of Jonah in the heart of the Yom Kippur liturgy? Is it simply because of the example of the people of Nineveh, who sincerely heed the call to repentance? That could be reason enough – we are called, today, to repent of our sins and misdeeds, and much of the liturgy fills us with the fear of horrible ends, of destruction of both body and spirit, should we fail to do so. We desperately want to be written in the Book of Life, as the people of Nineveh are.

Yet I think the appeal of this story, as we languish in our hunger, our thirst, our own repentance on Yom Kippur, is that many of us are just like Jonah – we are dragged kicking

and screaming into doing what's right. Our most moral, heroic, and repentant acts are often done under duress, after all our attempts to avoid the issue, to pull the covers over our heads, to complain or bargain our way out of responsibility have failed us. When we find ourselves in the belly of the fish, we finally step up and do the right thing, but we certainly don't look or feel particularly heroic when we do so, and we may not feel appreciated or even acknowledged for the sacrifice we have made.

Let's face it – telling each other the truth is a thankless job. There are very few circumstances under which it is appealing. Whether you are a parent disciplining your child, or an employee giving your boss bad news, or a teacher trying to bring a reluctant or indifferent student along – telling people the truth is frequently unpleasant. Yet, like Jonah, we do it -- when the stakes are high and we know in our hearts what is right – we do it.

Jonah's story tells us, I believe, that “doing it” is the most important thing. We don't have to like it. We don't have to feel noble (in fact, we are likely to look ridiculous – like those cartoon images I recall); we don't have to do it with a smile, we don't have to take a worshipful, uncomplaining stance as we take action. Ultimately, if we do what's right, we can make a difference – we can save a friend, we can save a community, we can save the world. Jonah is like our ancestors in b'midbar – kvetching their way through the desert, complaining, rebelling, and yet ultimately achieving the goal.

I see the story of Jonah as a story of hope, in the midst of this day of reflection. It is a story that demonstrates that even when our shortcomings are most on display, even when we are reluctant, or afraid, or downright opposed, to doing what we need to do, we can succeed in making a difference. We need not go at the task with perfection, we may fail repeatedly along the way, and we may never be praised or even acknowledged for our effort, but ultimately we are capable of making the difference, in a very human fashion. And in the end, God does not care so much that we act with grace, humility, or serenity – he cares that we act. As Samuel says, “Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken (better) than the fat of rams.”

No wonder so many towns, and so many major religions, want to lay claim to Jonah. No wonder his story resonates not only with us Jews, but with Muslims and Christians as well. Jonah was the most human of prophets, a man of many faults and weaknesses, and yet – he spoke truth to power. He is revered as a holy prophet -- but he was also just like us. May we, in the midst of our very messy lives, always remember that we can likewise speak truth and make a difference. It need not be with grace, or humility, or style – it just needs to be done.

G'mar Hatimah Tovah!