

DRASH -- YONAH

I have to admit that when I got the phone call asking me to give the drash on Yom Kippur afternoon, my reaction was the same as Jonah's: I wanted to run away. However, maybe David Abramson asked me more nicely than God asked Jonah because I did agree to do it. So at the end of this you can either thank David Abramson for asking me so nicely, or not thank him, depending on how you feel about the drash. I myself do thank David and the ritual committee for giving me this opportunity. And I thank Rabbi Bronstein for his help and advice and encouragement. In addition, I have to thank my brother's brother-in-law, Rabbi Steven Bob, who had the foresight to publish a book about the Book of Jonah called "Jonah and the Meaning of Our Lives" right at the same time that I was asked to do this drash. So I guess it was meant to be.

I know why I wanted to run away when David asked me. But it made me wonder why Jonah wanted to run away. When Jonah did finally go to Nineveh, all he said was "In 40 days, Nineveh will be overturned." A couple of Hebrew asides here. I have been calling him Jonah, but in Hebrew, his name is Yonah. Yonah is a dove and is the bird that Noach sent out from the ark. It's a lovely bird, and the sound of the name, Yonah, is very soft and sweet. It's a strangely ill-fitting name for such a cranky man.

Back to Yonah's prophecy that Nineveh will be overturned. What he says in Hebrew is:

עוד ארבעים יום ונינוה נהפכת

Nehpochet is from the same root as "hafooch" as in when you are in Israel and you order "café hafooch," which means upside down coffee. Yonah is saying that Nineveh will be turned upside down.

This is rather an ambiguous statement for a prophecy that is supposed to get people to repent. Apparently it worked though. He didn't say that God told him that and he didn't even say why it would be overturned, yet right away, everyone starts to fast and put on sackcloth. Either

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Yonah's reputation as an amazing prophet preceded him to Nineveh, or he was an extraordinarily charismatic figure to obtain such immediate results. It doesn't sound like Yonah's desire to run away would have stemmed from any feelings of inadequacy.

So why did Yonah attempt to escape from God's demand that he tell Nineveh to repent? Obviously, many commentators have grappled with this. Kimchi, for example, says Yonah fled to avoid embarrassing the Israelites. So many prophets urged the Israelites to repent and turn away from their evil path, yet they did not do so. How will it look to the world if the Ninevites repent when the Israelites did not? Abarbanel suggests that Yonah fled because Yonah knew that in the future, the Assyrians would conquer Israel and he did not want to be the means of aiding Israel's enemy.

These explanations did not resonate with me. I decided to look at the situation from a different perspective. As some of you may know, a little over a year ago, I was appointed to be a judge in New York City Family Court. So I thought that I would approach the Book of Jonah with my new perspective as a judge. (After all, this is the Day of Judgement.)

Looking at this story from the perspective of a judge brings me to a different understanding of Yonah's motivation. From this perspective, I think that Yonah was right and that God was wrong in their approach to the Ninevites' repentance. Let me give you some background for this conclusion.

In Family Court, I am often faced with situations where someone comes to court and says that he or she will no longer behave in a certain way. For example, it may be a custodial parent who has been refusing to allow the non-custodial parent sufficient access to the child, or it may be an abuser in a domestic violence situation, who come to court and promise, with complete sincerity, to change their ways. As a judge, do I simply accept the person's word and then dismiss

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the case? The answer is usually no. Well, why not? The question facing me as a judge is – is this conscious understanding enough to change the behavior? People get into patterns of behavior that are difficult to change even when they want to. So, usually, I am going to issue an order. And that order will have specific conditions in it: it may say that the child must spend X amount of time with the other parent, or that this person will be arrested if he or she continues in the abusive behavior. Because, even with the best of intentions, it is so easy to fall back into patterned ways of doing things. So in order to establish new patterns, one has to have rules – or in a judicial context, court orders – with real consequences.

This, I think, is the truth that Yonah understood. That it is very difficult for us as human beings to change our behavior, even when we have the best of intentions to do so. And this is perhaps why he was so opposed to prophesying in Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians did not believe in the God of the Israelites. But perhaps more importantly, from Yonah's perspective, the Assyrians did not have the Torah that God gave to the Israelites. Because, what is in that Torah? Many, many rules. And notably, at times, a listing of the consequences of not following the rules. For example, we heard a listing of the curses that will be imposed if we don't follow the rules just a few weeks ago in Shabbat Ki Tavo. Those rules are like judge's orders. Even if you have the best of intentions to be a good person, or to change your bad behavior, most of us are going to need some kind of external check on our behavior. If your community, like the Israelite community, has specific rules governing your behavior and the community polices the compliance with the rules, then there is great pressure to change one's behavior to comply.

But what of the Ninevites? Yonah finally comes to Nineveh with the prophecy that it will be overturned in 40 days. And the Ninevites are overcome with remorse and contrition. From the

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king to the beasts, they don sackcloth and fast and repent. And God saw that they turned from their evil ways and so God did not impose the punishment that was intended for them. As the Gemara points out, the verse does not say that God saw their sackcloth and ashes and decided to avert the punishment, but rather, that God decided to avert the punishment after seeing מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם – their deeds. But from Yonah's perspective, and from a judge's perspective, perhaps God was acting too quickly. Without follow-up, in other words, without orders or rules that they had to follow, the Ninevites' contrition and desire to follow a better path was likely to be temporary only. They may have had the will to be better and to do better, but without the direction of rules such as those given to the Israelites in the Torah, they had no external means to ensure that their behavior would remain changed.

So what does this mean for us today on Yom Kippur? After all, we do much of what the Ninevites did. We don't put on sackcloth and ashes today, but we certainly fast, and we search our hearts and, hopefully, turn from our evil ways. But I think what Yonah was trying to tell us by disobeying God's word to him is that good intentions are not enough. Conducting a serious reckoning of one's failings and faults is a necessary condition but not a sufficient one to ensure that one's behavior will actually change.

So I, at least, am willing to concede that there was some validity in Yonah's instinct to defy God. And I conclude from that, that not only is it not enough to put on sackcloth and ashes and to fast, it is not enough to have good intentions to change my behavior. What I really need to do is to fashion the specific rules that I need in order to change. I can't just say, I will be a better person this year. I need to be specific about how I am going to change – fashioning the rules that will ensure that I will spend X amount of time doing these acts that I think are important and valuable.

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In effect, setting a court order for myself. Without the specificity of rules – even if they are rules that we make for ourselves – our good intentions are unlikely to have staying power.

Perhaps that is why we read Yonah right before Ne'ilah – as a reminder that our repentance and our improved behavior should last throughout the year. I wish you all g'mar hatimah tovah – and to stay the course.