

Hello. Before beginning my drash, I would just like to thank the Bet Am Shalom Synagogue, Rabbi Bronstein, and the many administrators within the synagogue that have given me the opportunity—and went out on a limb for a young adult fresh out of high school—to make a speech on one of the most important days in the Jewish year. I deeply appreciate it.

In my opinion, Yom Kippur, and the days of atonement in general, can be mainly seen as focusing on the idea of justice. While justice can seem to be this extremely nebulous idea, I think that a useful definition for justice is simply the way in which reasonable, deserved consequences can be assigned to a person's actions, both good and bad. It is a matter of ensuring that people who do bad things receive punishment and mensches are rewarded for their good deeds. I mean, this is exactly what we want, right?

This idea is an omnipresent one, often referred to as *lex talionis*, or the law of retribution. Hammurabi's Code, one of the earliest written legal documents created in Babylon over 4 millennia ago, establishes a clear system of action and consequence through its nearly 300 written laws, many of which are very unforgiving. Similar sentiments are expressed multiple times in the Old Testament throughout Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. To quote the famous line from Parashat

Shoftim, a portion entirely devoted to establishing rules for the early Israelites (which we read in services barely a month ago), “You shall not have pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot”. While there is much debate about the actual meaning of this line (and the entire portion full of similarly harsh laws), it still conveys the focus on this idea of retribution. Many of the world’s modern legal systems are built upon a similar principle. Instead of an exact exchange (i.e. an eye for an eye), something else is substituted in its place: usually monetary compensation or temporal compensation, which often comes in the form of jail time. In fact, when guilty individuals are punished with jail time, it is said that they are “serving time”, indicating that this is their retribution for their committed crimes. These several examples convey the degree to which these ideas of retributive justice are intrinsic to our ideologies and societies. With that in mind, let’s look at the story of Jonah.

Whenever we read Jonah at this time of year, I often find it difficult to come to terms with the story. Despite Jonah being the protagonist, and his rationale being a common one today, as mentioned earlier, it’s clear that Jonah is very heavily punished in this story. In fact, Jonah is the ONLY person to be punished in any way in the story. He is semi-forcibly tossed into the ocean, swallowed by a fish for 3 days, and tormented by God through the destruction of his prized

shade bearing plant. This is especially odd given the fact that the people of Nineveh actually committed wrongdoings but received very little punishment. It is not initially clear why this is occurring: is it for disobeying God? If so, why is his punishment so severe? One might think that being engulfed within a fish for 3 days should be punishment enough. To better understand the root cause of his punishment, we need to understand what drives Jonah.

Above all, Jonah is a man who values the importance of reciprocal justice; this is evident when we see him on the boat as he tries to escape from Jaffa. While we often like to focus on the fact that he was sleeping on the boat while the storm raged and the rest of the passengers were desperately trying to weather the storm, we also see that as soon as he realizes that the storm is caused by his presence, he is quick to offer a heroic, selfless solution in Jonah 1:12. "Heave me overboard, and the sea will calm down for you; for I know that this terrible storm came upon you on my account". Instead of avoiding responsibility, he accepts it willingly. Instead of avoiding punishment, he accepts it willingly. To him, it is imperative that people's actions garner their necessary consequences.

Jonah extends this same moral rigidity to the application of justice to others that he gives himself, and it is for this reason that he is

severely punished. Again, there might be some portion of his punishment that is due to his insubordination of God's command, but it is more likely, in my opinion, that this is a grand gesture being done to convey the importance of allowing others to properly atone for their mistakes. Here, Jonah tries to impose his own reciprocal justice system, akin to that of most modern legal systems, on the Ninevites. To counter this, God introduces his own system of morality and justice, one built upon forgiveness and an assurance that everyone has an opportunity to atone for their actions and move on from them (even if they are not Jewish, as it is likely that the Ninevite people were gentiles). This is an incredibly rare occurrence, as a legal system based on retribution has been so central to human civilization for millennia. Instead of focusing on balance or retaliation, God's justice system focuses on redemption. This intended message can be seen even more clearly by looking at which characters we are supposed to affiliate ourselves with. While it might initially appear to be Jonah, as he is the protagonist and a Jewish prophet communing with God, it is actually the Ninevites to whom we are being drawn most strongly towards.

We are directly connected to the Ninevites by the rituals that we perform today, separated by thousands of years yet still mirroring each other throughout time. Here are the commands that God gave to the Ninevites through Jonah: "No man or beast shall taste anything! They

shall not graze, and they shall not drink water! They shall be covered with sackcloth and shall cry mightily to God.” Sound familiar? And, of course, the Ninevites are protected from God’s wrath through their repentance and atonement, just as we hope to be today as God seals our fates for the next year. Despite mistakes that we have made in the past, we will not necessarily receive the entirety of our “deserved” consequences for said actions, as we have a chance at forgiveness. As we have said multitudes of times over the high holidays,

וּתְשׁוּבָה וּתְפִלָּה וּצְדָקָה מֵעֲבִירִין אֶת רֵעַ הַגְּזֵרָה.

U'teshuva, u'tefila, u'tzedakah maavirin et roa hagezora

Repentance, prayer, and charity avert the severity of the decree. While all of us might sometimes act in non-virtuous ways, we are assured today through our reading of Jonah that we are capable of—and deserving of—redemption for past actions, assuming you follow through your proper atonement, of course.

Now let’s retell the story of Jonah from the eyes of the Ninevites, which might make it easier to see the intended lesson. A city commits wicked acts and is at risk of destruction but is offered a chance at forgiveness and redemption by God. Despite the actions of one individual who tries to prevent Nineveh from receiving said benediction, divine intervention ensures that they receive mercy. This is

a really different story, isn't it? In fact, this forgiveness-based justice system can be seen as what sets Yom Kippur apart; while the "assumed" form of justice in our society is normally to ensure that people receive consequences for their actions, all bets are off for Yom Kippur. Instead, we focus on our own transgressions, trying to atone for them and hoping for forgiveness. Of course, this is a welcome change of pace, as everyone is wont to agree with a reciprocal justice system...until you are the one being tried for something. With that in mind, we might leave here today trying to be more forgiving of others for their transgressions; we would hope that others would do the same for us. Thank you.