

YOM KIPPUR 5766
Rabbi Amy Schwartzman
Temple Rodef Shalom
October 13, 2005

By now many of you may have noticed that I have a “*thing*” for Jonah. I’m not sure exactly what it is – maybe a crush, maybe a fascination, hopefully not an obsession; but Jonah certainly has dominated a great deal of my rabbinic thinking. Over the years I’ve given a number of Yom Kippur sermons on this book. I studied the commentaries to Jonah during my sabbatical, and if Kevin and I would have had a son, I would have liked to have named him Jonah.

I don’t know exactly why I am so drawn to this book. The story is both incredibly simplistic and, at the same time, deeply complex. Reading the book is always an adventure. Where we are in our lives determines which of the many plots and subplots we are able to hear. One year we hear the message of repentance as the people of Nineveh change their ways telling us that we can change to. Another year we grapple with universal love and responsibility as God, accepting the Ninevites’ teshuvah, reminds us that God cares for all people. Other times I have sensed that the purpose of the Jonah story is to show us how often we, like Jonah, run away from God and from God’s expectations of us.

Every year is different depending on what is happening around us, but every year I am struck by the ending of the story. I always know it is coming, I always know exactly what is going to happen, yet each year the ending seems to come as a surprise. This year, it is the ending on which I would like to focus. It suggests yet another critical theme for us to consider - a theme which is compelling every year, but seems to speak especially loudly to me on this Yom Kippur. That is the theme of *rachamim*, the Hebrew word for compassion or empathy – compassion is what God gives to the people of Nineveh; empathy is what Jonah cannot seem to give to anyone.

On this day of repentance and change, of atonement and forgiveness, Jonah’s story demands that we ask ourselves how well we have practiced these virtually inseparable traits of empathy and compassion. Have we been like Jonah or have we been like God?

There is a woman standing waist deep in glistening toxic current with a whole city's possessions floating around her, all of her belongings in a plastic bag and I am sitting on my couch. I have written a generous check but I am sitting on my couch.

I am at the Parent Night last year in England. I am standing by the coffee. In walks another mother whose daughter, an awkward girl, has invited Hannah for numerous, yet unscheduled, play dates. This woman is quite unusual herself and I sense that few people have the patience to talk to her. I quickly turn and walk purposefully to ...I don't know where, offer a quick hello as I pass by, and take refuge amongst another group of parents.

Jonah's story weighs heavily on me because I know that too often I have been like him. At the end of the story, when God asked for a compassionate response to people in need Jonah shut down his emotions, closed off his sense of empathy, turned his back and sulked under a bush. Perhaps I have not responded quite that badly, but throughout the year, God has been asking me, all of us, for our empathy after a tsunami, a hurricane, a flood and now an earthquake. God is looking for our compassionate response to the illness of a young person, the crisis in the home of a neighbor and the suffering of a member of our own family. Have I done much more than Jonah? Have we responded with the rachamim that God demands?

The fact that tens of thousands of people remain in shelters in the south makes me think that the answer is no, I have not done much more than Jonah. No, we have not responded with the rachamim that God demands. In our own congregation, people still stand alone at the oneg shabbat, while others take shelter in their own circle of friends. We as individuals, as a community and as a nation have fallen short of responding with that deep empathic compassion that is taught in Book of Jonah. That is why we must read this story today. That is why we must pay attention to the powerful ending where God challenges Jonah and us to feel more deeply and act more compassionately.

Surely you remember the main events of the story. Jonah has been asked by God to go to Nineveh and tell the people there that if they don't stop their sinful behavior, God will punish them and Nineveh will be no more. Jonah runs away from God's call, he ends

up on a storm tossed ship and later in a fish. Finally he goes to Nineveh and to his shock the people change their ways. Then to Jonah's greater disappointment, God accepts their repentance and spares them from destruction. In the end, he walks away from Nineveh. God, seeing this reaction, realizes that Jonah needs a lesson in compassion and empathy and here is the amazing ending that says so much to all of us.

While Jonah sits angrily outside of the city, God creates a large plant to shade Jonah from the desert sun. Of course, Jonah is delighted by the shade. But at dawn the next day, God sends a worm to eat the plant. By the time the sun is up and the dry wind is blowing the plant is dead and Jonah wants to die too. Now listen to their words:

God says: Are you that angry about the plant. Yes, I am so angry that I want to die, responds Jonah. You have such concern for the plant for which you did not work, nor do anything to make it grow. It came up over night and perished over night. And should I, I not spare Nineveh, that great city, where there are more than 120,000 people who cannot even discern their right hand from their left and many cattle as well?

Can't you hear God's frustration at the end of this story! God is stunned by Jonah's behavior. There are a myriad of questions bursting through these last lines. I hear God saying: Jonah, what are you thinking?! Don't you understand how absurd your death wish sounds?! Don't you hear how insensitive and heartless you seem?! You care for this measly plant, but you don't care for these people – people who are my creations. You obviously need to learn how to become more compassionate, more empathic to your fellow human beings and to many cattle as well!

This year, while tragedies have dominated our global, national and communal news, it is impossible to read this story without hearing God's call for our empathy and compassion. God is not only speaking to Jonah but to each one of us. God is addressing that part of us that sometimes withholds the compassion others need; - that part of us that prevents us from understanding a situation from a perspective other than our own. That part of us that wants justice when really mercy is called for. Today's reading reminds us that God wants us to feel, deep within our being, that which another person is experiencing. To feel the hopelessness of wading through water with every thing you have in a plastic bag. To know the pain and embarrassment of standing alone, isolated, left out. God wants us to open up that place where our own pain and joy and longing

reside; to go to that place and to listen and respond from that well of empathy and compassion that is found deep in each one of us.

Certainly, this is not easy to do. We can often identify with the experiences of others, but we fall short of exposing ourselves to their true emotions. Frequently we can be sympathetic but rarely do we come close to empathic compassion.

I recently witnessed this in a shiva minyan. A Temple member lost a parent. I was standing in the hall when a neighbor came in to offer comfort to the mourner. “Shirley, (I will call her) I understand just what you are feeling.” He said. “I lost my father a few years ago too.” I watched as the expression on Shirley’s face changed. Instead of a warm smile, her expression went cold. In an attempt to show his compassion, this friend ended up doing exactly the opposite. He spoke about himself instead of listening to her. By placing his experience ahead of hers she became irrelevant, her emotions were dismissed. This neighbor unintentionally erected a barrier when he really wanted to open a door. I imagine Shirley stood there saying to herself. “He means well. He is trying to understand me out of his own experience. My calamity is his excuse to talk about his. I appreciate his good intentions. But for now, I just wish that he would hear me out or go on into the kitchen.”

At that moment I saw the difference between sympathy, which is our ability to identify with another’s feelings by using our own experiences; and empathy, which is when we open ourselves to the thoughts of another individual without allowing our experiences or judgments to be part of the equation. Shirley’s neighbor meant to provide empathy, rachamim, but he fell short. He could only show sympathy. Sympathy does not bring healing. Sympathy often allows us to stay on the couch, to participate in another’s pain from our own place of comfort. Empathy, a much deeper experience, brings the pain of others into our very beings. We have no choice but to respond – because we experience their emotions as if they were our own. Moving from sympathy to empathy is our great challenge. Moving from sympathy to empathy is the way God wants us to respond to our world.

If only we were all native Hebrew speakers, we might find this lesson a bit easier. There is wonderful insight found in the Hebrew that can help us better achieve this goal to be more empathic. This word Rachamim comes from the root Resh, chet, mem,

Rechem – which means womb. The womb is an organ that has the ability to hold another within it. Two entities are distinct but one is so closely linked to the other that she feels its movements, not from an outside source, but from within. The key to this image lies in the ability of one person to hold the other within while allowing that other person to remain separate. It is only in this state that we can experience both an emotional connection to as well as a responsibility towards the other.

Of course, the wisdom of our sacred tradition and its language is not limited to women. All of us can be womb-like, all of us can and do embody rachamim. We know this because throughout of liturgy God is called Ha-rachaman – the compassionate one; the one from whom the world came forth; the womb to all humankind. We are all created in the image of God. Man or woman, young or old, with children or without, we all have a rechem, a place deep within us that has the capacity to hold another so intimately that we feel their pain, their joy and their pride and their longings.

Let's return to the friend I called Shirley. Imagine what might have happened if her neighbor came to the shiva prepared to listen to Shirley from that place of rachamim. Suppose he had refrained from imposing his understanding of loss on her experience. Perhaps he would have said, "Shirley, tell me about what you are going through. What does this death mean to you? Now he opens himself completely to her without his preconceived notions. This conversation is no longer about him, but all about her. Holding her feelings within him, he taps into his empathy and is compelled to respond with compassion. "How can I comfort you?" are the words that naturally follow.

God wanted to hear these words from Jonah. More than that, God wanted to see Jonah reach out to the Ninevites and help them to change. After all, are we not God's hands on this earth? Is it not through us that God acts in the world?

The French philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas captures this most aptly. He teaches: "From the start, the encounter with the Other is my responsibility for him. That is the responsibility for my neighbor, which is, no doubt, the harsh name for what we call love of one's neighbor; love without Eros, charity, love in which the ethical aspect dominates the passionate aspect." Levinas instructs us that the only way to achieve this sense of empathy is by the physical act of coming face to face with another person. Since we cannot physically envelope another within us, Levinas instructs us to look into the face of

the other in order to learn his feelings and thoughts and fears. What words come from his eyes? What message from his clenched jaws? What pain from the silent cry locked in the throat? Only when we come face to face with the other can we begin to open the doors of empathy and walk the path of compassionate response.

Remember that woman standing waist deep in glistening toxic current with a whole cities possessions floating around her, all of her belongings in a plastic bag? I assure you it was an unforgettable image - a chair looked like it belonged to someone's grandmother, a child's dollhouse was half submerged. I can see now the plastic bag maybe half filled. But this woman's face – I have no memory of her face. I cannot recall the profound hopelessness and pain that must have been there. Do you remember her face?

This essential act of looking into the face of the other was suggested long before Levinas. In the Talmud, a text he surely studied, we find a peculiar practice that quite subtlety teaches empathy. In ancient times, when the people came to the Temple to offer a sacrifice, they would enter through the right side of the altar and leave by the left. However, mourners, ill people and others who were in need would enter from the left and exit to the right. Why did our ancestors create such a regulated system? Actually, it was ingenious. You see, our tradition wanted the people who came to the Temple whole, bringing offerings of joy and gratitude, to be forced to see the faces of those who were not whole. As they walked towards each other, their eyes would meet. I imagine that the lines moved rather slowly and each person would have plenty of time to search the face of the person passing him by for his pain and suffering. This was a vehicle not for embarrassment or isolation but for healing and comfort. One person's dry tears or another's taut mouth would open the rechem within us and compel us to reach out. Sometimes through simply a touch or a hug, other times through meal or a ride, once in a while we change our own lives in order to respond to the needs of another.

The prophet Jonah failed to learn this lesson from the Talmud. He lived in Jaffa, maybe he had never visited the Temple. When he walked through Nineveh he did not look into the faces of the people who lived there. Had he looked into their eyes, he would have been able to see that they did not understand their shortcomings. Had he listening to

the tone of their voice, he would have known that they were open to his help in their change. Had he felt their pain he would have responded with compassion.

Imagine how this story would have ended if Jonah would had understood God's message of rachamim, empathic compassion, from the lesson with the plant. Now, sitting at the edge of the city, I imagine added a loving response is added to the place where only an indictment once stood.

Listen again to the words:

(God says:) Are you that angry about the plant? Yes, I am so angry that I want to die, replies Jonah. You have such concern for the plant for which you did not work, nor do anything to make it grow. It came up over night and perished over night. And should I, I not spare Nineveh, that great city, where there are more than 120,000 people who cannot even discern their right hand from their left and many cattle as well?

God, how did I not see? I have been so blind to the face of the other. I have closed my eyes to their needs, their pain, their potential. S'lach Li – forgive me. Al chet she hatati lifanecha – for the sin I have committed against You by my indifference. Al chet she hatati lifanecha - For the sin have committed against You by my lack of rachamin. Al chet she hatati lifanecha - for closing my eyes to the face of the other. And Jonah wept, his tears flowed from that place deep within him, now exposed, now filled with the needs of the other. Then Jonah stood and began to walk away. "Where are you going?" asked God. First to Basra, then Jerusalem, then New Orleans and Arlington and on from there. Harachaman, the compassionate one, then opened the great womb of humanity and replied "Selachti C'dvarecha – I have pardoned in response to your deeds."

On this Day of Atonement and change, may we hear God calling to us from Jonah's book. May we open that rechem, that womb of empathy which is deep in every one of us so that we may respond to our world and each other with rachamim, mercy, compassion and love.

Ken y'hi rason. – may this be God's will.

Rabbi Amy Schwartzman
Temple Rodef Shalom
5766 – 2005

**special thanks go out to Alison Landsberg and Rabbi Lia Bass for their insights and help in preparing this sermon.*