

YOM KIPPUR 5771

The voice of God came to Jonah son of Amittai saying: “Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city and proclaim against it; for its wickedness has come up before Me”. But Jonah fled from God’s presence. He went down to Jaffa and onto a ship and ran from God’s call.”

Each year when I hear these opening lines from the Book of Jonah on YK afternoon, my heart starts to thump hard. Jonah’s actions worry me. I can sense that something bad is going to happen. Of course it does. Jonah is thrown overboard and ends up in the belly of a fish. The fish spits him out in Nineveh and Jonah is compelled to carry out God’s command. The people of Nineveh change but Jonah, whose name means dove, is unable to make peace with the events. Like a frightened bird, he is in flight from the beginning of the story until it ends.

I suspect that many of you are familiar with this saga. A fish tale it is not, nor is it really a story for children’s books. Most people see it as God’s plea for us to change our ways as the Ninevites did. It begs us to show compassion to one another as God did, and it challenges us to accept God’s call to engage in the world and help others to change.

But this year, I read Jonah through an entirely different lens. I saw the story of a man in crisis – emotional crisis. This year Jonah spoke to me as a person who faced a profound challenge, a deep moral calling that was more than he could handle. Overwhelmed by this, Jonah panicked, he fled. Through his journey he became more and more despondent, more and more alone... down he went to the port, down into the hold of the ship, down into the belly of the fish... with each step he became more and more removed from the people who could help him. God instructs him to ‘cry aloud,’ the captain of the ship and the sailors all tell him to ‘speak out.’ But his pain only goes inward and his silence intensifies. The story ends with Jonah sitting alone looking over Nineveh, the formerly evil place that has received God’s forgiveness. Jonah can see nothing good in this event. God tries to explain what compassion means but Jonah is so angry and so deeply pained that all he wants to do is to die.

This year I read this story of anxiety and anguish with urgency and clarity. I saw it through this lens because this has been a year with many emotional challenges for our community. Stress, depression, anxiety, even suicide have touched a significant number

of our Temple families. I too have felt a great deal of anguish as I tried to offer my support. There were many sleepless nights and distracted days as I thought about our emotional fragility. Jonah's story has put words to some of the pain we have all experienced. Many of us can identify with Jonah's struggles. We are individuals who live with emotional crises that creep up on us in our daily lives, or appear suddenly out of nowhere. They stay for a day or a month or perhaps longer.

And we also are families who live with diagnosed brain disorders and mental illnesses. A sister who is bi-polar, a brother with addiction, a parent with dementia, a child with an eating disorder. Mental health challenges are everywhere! I know that, in each of our lives there are for us, as there were for Jonah, moments of emotional struggle. Times when stresses and tragic situations disrupt the balance we need and shake the secure foundation on which we stand. We don't have to suffer from anxiety or depression for example to relate to that constricting feeling as the world shrinks around us. Worry dominates our thoughts and a good night's sleep is a rare event. None of these feelings have anything to do with a weak will or moral imbalance. They are just part of normal life in the 21st century, and they are challenges that we must meet together.

A great tempest engulfed the sea, the sailors rushed about but Jonah hid in the innermost part of the ship.

A former member of our congregation was a successful financial planner. A few years ago he told everyone that he was taking some time off to travel. No one knew that each morning he struggled to pull himself out of bed, he dreaded the light and the day ahead. He left Washington. I later learned that he never returned to work, I haven't seen him since.

There are times when we all have the urge to flee – to just leave it all behind, the stress, the work, the expectations. While most of us stay put, we usually face these challenges alone as Jonah did. Few of us are willing to share a moment of emotional angst with anyone else. Perhaps that is because all too often these moments of vulnerability are met with silence and even with shame. Maybe you remember Neil Simon's play Brighton Beach Memoirs where there is a scene of the family sitting around

the dinner table. The mom turns to her sister and says: “Did you hear about Sophie? She has (whisper) cancer.” My own mother told me that this was indeed the way everyone spoke about certain illnesses when she was growing up even though her father was a doctor. Cancer 50 years ago, AIDS 20 years ago, and I would suggest mental and emotional challenges to this day have been spoken in a whisper as if to say that if said aloud we might become susceptible to these conditions. And so we put a wall of silence around these situations; a wall that isolates the sufferers as well as those who love them.

Yom Kippur is a time to tackle difficult issues and I believe that on this Yom Kippur the book of Jonah can help us to talk about the emotional challenges we all have or will some day face. I’m concerned that we don’t pay enough attention to our psychological health. We don’t give enough serious consideration to moments when we feel especially down or anxious or when we see those behaviors in others. We don’t share them or speak about them often or ever. I believe that a community cannot be whole when a part of that community’s life remains in hiding or when some of its members are absent or invisible. I want to talk openly and loudly about our personal psychological wellbeing. Perhaps our Jewish tradition opens the door for this each year when we read Jonah aloud and experience his journey from a not “too out of the ordinary” emotional crisis to a deep seeded dis-ease.

The captain of the ship told Jonah to cry out to his God to stop the storm but Jonah lay still, deep in the hold of the ship.

When I was a sophomore in college there was a student who lived two doors down from me. I rarely saw him, but once when I ran into him, I asked him about his classes. After a while he admitted to me that he had stopped taking any classes, but he hadn’t told anyone, not his friends, nor his advisor and not even his parents.

The fact that we as a society are reluctant to engage in conversations about emotional hardships has hurt us as individuals and as a community. Our silence informs the people around us, especially our children, telling them that they must be silent too. I’ve come to believe that this silence is rooted in our own fear and discomfort with issues of mental health. And the root of our fear may grow, consciously or unconsciously, from

our identification with those who are suffering. The idea that we could be afflicted is terrifying to bear. These events wreak havoc with the fundamentals of our being: moods, emotions and thoughts. These intangibles constitute the essence of our identity. We rely on them to make sense of our lives. Without them, we find ourselves like Jonah, on a downward spiral, more and more alone until what may have begun as a time of difficulty becomes a true crisis.

God tells Jonah to cry aloud, as do the captain of the ship and the sailors. Once in a while members of the temple or friends cry aloud and share their emotional anguish with me. When they talk to me about the pain of living with a psychological challenge – their own, or that of their parent or child, spouse – they often talk about feeling alone. There are other feelings as well of course – anger and frustration, fear and confusion, fatigue, resentment and often a deep sense of spiritual betrayal and bewilderment about why life has handed them such an unfair burden to carry. Often they feel betrayed by God. But most disturbing is their shame – shame stemming from their experience with others, our behavior – our silence or our distance. We have created a climate in which moments of psychological insecurity are perceived as an embarrassing failure.

Cast me out, heave me overboard, pleaded Jonah, for I know that this great storm which we are all experiencing is on my account.

My first visit to Dominion Psychiatric Hospital many years ago was to see a Temple member who had exhibited some worrisome behaviors. She felt that her problems were ruining her family. It seemed as though her parents were always mad at her and at one another. She thought it was her fault. She was 11.

While few of us feel such a deep level of guilt some of us do. Challenging moments such as crises at work, tragedies in our families, the pressure to perform, leave many of us feeling anxious, overwhelmed, depressed and often with those feelings come a great deal of remorse. While the initial situation might be the result of an external issue, internally we are affected, and in the bigger picture, our families, friends and co-workers are affected. Our hearts race and we don't sleep well. We have little energy and less interest in the people around us. But we don't get extra points for suffering. Professionals

can help and we should seek them out. But here in the religious community our sights are focused elsewhere: on shaping character and heart and soul; on cultivating compassion, diminishing isolation and building communities that are human and holy. Sadly, none of us can avoid emotional hardships nor can we banish mental illness from the world. But as Jews it's our responsibility to do everything we can to relieve the pain.

The Talmud, written nearly 2000 years ago tells the story of a famous scholar and a time of his emotional crisis. No one had seen Rabbi Eleazar for a number of days. His friend Rabbi Yochanan went to his house to find him. When he entered he found the room dark despite the beautiful day outside. Eleazar was still in bed, turned toward the wall. He could not bring himself to look toward the window at life and light. Yochanan entered the room, looked down through the darkness at his friend and pulled up a chair. Yochanan prepared to sit in this heavy silence for a long time. He began to roll up his sleeves; his face reflected the darkness, but his hands and arms seemed to brighten the room with their own light. Rabbi Eleazar turned from the wall to face his friend.

Yochanan asked: "Why are you crying?" Eleazar was silent for a moment. Then he blinked at the brightness of Yochanan's white shirt, his gentle hands, the pale skin of his forearms. He finally spoke, "I weep because all light fades into darkness. Because all living things eventually die." Yochanan affirmed, "Yes, ultimately everything comes to an end. So perhaps you have reason to weep." And then they cried in darkness together.

After some time Yochanan asked: "Does this darkness comfort you?" Slowly Eleazar shook his head, "Maybe it did in the beginning, but it can't protect me from my thoughts." Yochanan asked: "And the silence? Is it comforting?" "No." "And being alone?" Eleazar looked into his friend's eyes? "No, Loneliness only adds to my suffering. Once I couldn't bear other's noise and laughter, now I can't bear the alternative. But I don't know the way back to the living."

Yochanan asked: "Will you let me help you?" "I will try." Yochanan extended his hand. Eleazar took hold of it. He felt light and life touch him. He felt strength and warmth reach him. His friend Yochanan raised him out of his bed and helped him to the door.

For Eleazar, the darkness may have been something he struggled with throughout his life, or perhaps it was something that came upon him only once. But at this moment it

debilitates and consumes him. It might seem obvious to us that Eleazar is experiencing depression. But the Talmudic rabbis did not use words like “depression” or “emotional crises” or even “mental illness.” Maybe it’s better that way. Without labels to alarm us, we can listen with more open minds. We hear this story and it simply breaks our hearts.

When Jonah saw that God forgave the people of Nineveh he grieved. While compassion surrounded him, Jonah could only see unfairness.

A teenager sees only bulging flesh where the scale indicates skin and bones.

To whom will we turn in moments like these? Who will help us to regain our perspective? When our reality is distorted, who will help us to see things as they actually are? Who will have the courage to speak to this girl in this place of ailing illusion?

One of the most important mitzvot, or commandments, in our tradition is Bikkur Cholim or visiting the sick. It is said that Bikkur cholim is a mitzvah that is done *b’guf* – with one’s own body. That is: you cannot fulfill this mitzvah by sending a note or a check. Bikkur cholim requires personal presence. Presence is about the human encounter and connection. For those who heard my sermon on Rosh Hashanah, it is about saying Hineni.

Rabbi Tzvi Blanchard writes: “when we connect with those who are ill we must identify with them. We must seek out our similarities; we must find how we are like them.” That is what makes bikkur cholim such a powerful and essential religious response. It is about entering into the experience of others. It is about empathy, a sense of shared vulnerability and shared humanity. It is not about waiting for those who are suffering to come to us; it is about reaching out to them and drawing them out of their pain and uncertainty, about extending ourselves and expanding our capacity for chesed, for understanding and for unselfish love.

Jonah cried out to God;” take my life, for it is better for me to die than to live”.

When I was 13, my uncle committed suicide. In the car ride to their home, my parents tried to explain to my brothers and me that caring, no matter how abundant and boundless, cannot always rescue people who are engulfed in pain and dread.

At those moments, we must remember that we cannot “love” emotional hardships or mental illness away. We cannot diagnose, and obviously not cure, mental illness by loving someone or showing how great life is. We cannot tell someone to “cheer up” or “go to the gym” when they are in pain. But we can help. We can become more attuned to our own emotional state as well as the emotional condition of those who share our lives. We can talk about our own psychological health. We can listen more, cry more and take more time with one another. We can change the climate to one that is more open to the reality that like physical health, mental health is not guaranteed. Like Jonah we are at times on what is an unpredictable journey.

When, ten years ago, a friend of mine was going through a divorce, and she was left without a penny to her name, she was in despair. I asked her about that time and she said that what helped her was both a good therapist, and a good community. When she went to services every Shabbat people would sit by her side, pray along with her, and she could feel their support. Others would ask how she was doing during the oneg and she sensed that they really wanted to know. Sometimes it was too tiring to go into all the details. But other times, she explained to me, she really needed to tell them what was going on. Her community helped her see that there was more to her than her bank account and the divorce. They met her in that sad place and never let her stay there alone.

We, as a community, must also help by being truly present. Let us imagine ourselves as healers. Through our willingness to go into the dark room, or sit ‘b’gufo’ - in person beside the friend who is suffering and to simply listen we, healers, will make a difference. If only someone had gone down into the hold of Jonah’s ship and sat there long enough to hear about his worries and his fears. If only someone had noticed that Rabbi Eleazar was participating less and less in the Talmudic discussions. If only we could make time to find out what it feels like to be “overwhelmed by work” or “worried sick” about something that is real or real only to us; if we could respond not only to a broken leg but also to a broken heart and a despondent soul. If only we had the courage to ask each other how we feel inside; and if only we had the courage to answer.

The time has come for spiritual communities, including ours, to invite these conversations into our sacred circles. They will only become part of our oneg after we

have experienced them around our dinner tables, at bedtime and on weekend walks. Sometimes we will have answers; other times we will be silent. As long as we are there, with or without words, we can make a difference. As long as we are available, present, open hearted we can reduce someone's suffering and release them from feelings of isolation. Jonah needed a friend, he needed a community to surround him, listen to him and support him. Many Jonahs sit with us today. We cannot let them go down to the depths alone. There are times when each of us is Jonah. We so very much need this community to reach out to us and hold us in the midst of a moment of anguish. God commanded Jonah to 'cry out' but he could not. Today I 'cry out' on his behalf. Let us find it in our hearts to respond.

Amen

Rabbi Amy Schwartzman
Temple Rodef Shalom
Yom Kippur 5771-2010