



Temple Rodef Shalom

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Jonah and the Struggle to Change

Had my first child, my daughter Hannah, been born a boy, we would have named him Jonah. I've always loved this name perhaps because it means 'dove' in Hebrew. Perhaps because in my childhood memories, hearing the Book of Jonah late in the day on Yom Kippur meant it was almost the end of the holiday. Since my years in Rabbinic School I have enjoyed delving deep into this book - only four chapters yet packed with messages and metaphors and meaning. You may know I love mining this book, which is our reading assigned to tomorrow/this afternoon. In the last 30 years (yes, this is my 30 HH here) I have given 5 sermons on Jonah.

However, if I were pregnant now, which I am definitely not, I might not choose the name Jonah. I imagine most of you know Jonah and his story. He is the reluctant prophet called by God to go to his enemies, the Ninevites, and help them to repent for their sins. But Jonah runs away. He ends up on a boat in a storm and then, after being thrown overboard, he finds himself in the belly of a whale for 3 days. Eventually he makes it to Nineveh and tells the people that they and their city will be destroyed if they don't repent. They do repent, but Jonah isn't happy about it. The story ends with God affirming what Jonah cannot – all humanity and more, all-living creatures, matter to the Divine.

So why not name my son Jonah? (Apologies to Jaimee and Rabbi Jeff Saxe who have a wonderful Jonah-son and all of the other Jonah's out there!) It's not because he's a reluctant prophet. I can empathize with Jonah for that. I am no prophet, but there are times when I too want to run away from heavy responsibilities. Nor do I condemn Jonah for having an existential crisis. Such events happen in life. I understand that Jonah is weighed down by the chaos that surrounds him. Many of us feel just this way now. We look out and often despair at the state of our world; we see violence, intolerance, anti-Semitism – it's hard to be hopeful. We get how Jonah feels. Yet I've come to see that Jonah is filled with a troubling cynicism; he can't imagine change – not for himself and especially not for others – and this rigid, closed, mindset leads to his downfall. Jonah's failure is not unique. So many of us refuse to contemplate making the changes that this Yom Kippur requires of us. We also doubt the sincerity of the people who ask our forgiveness and vow to do better in the year ahead. Jonah's downfall, I fear, might also be ours.

It's taken me most of these 30 years to fully understand this and to understand that Yom Kippur and Judaism writ large are about all that which Jonah cannot see - optimism and redemption, change and potential. Despite the fasting, the somber prayers and the evocative music, the big take away of Yom Kippur is hopefulness. And despite its main character, who is not actually its hero, the Book of Jonah is intentionally positioned as the final coda of our Days of Awe because this is its message. This revolutionary story is overflowing with images of transformation and restitution, love and acceptance – and everyone in the story, including God, gets this - everyone except Jonah.

So, what's at the root of Jonah's problem? Where is his blind spot? What is he missing? To begin with, Jonah holds a profound misconception about God and the Israelites. Throughout the story, Jonah speaks of his loyalty to Israel, only Israel. He believes that God also only cares about the Jews and that prophecy and moral integrity are restricted to the Jewish soul. Thinking this way, Jonah sees no value in reaching out to the Ninevites. I hear him saying, "Why should I preach repentance to those heathens? Those Ninevites are the enemies of Israel. Let them perish. Not even God cares about them and the fate of their civilization?"

Could Jonah have forgotten one of the first stories he learned in religious school? The one where God creates Adam and Eve and from them all of humanity? Did he not notice that when we offer blessings, we refer to God as *Elohaynu Melech ha-Olam*, God of the universe, God of the cosmos – God of the whole place? God created the world and God created Israel to live in the world, among the people of the world whom God created. As much as Jonah would believe otherwise, *Elohaynu Melech ha-Olam* is not a tribal God.ⁱ

More than that, God's love for all humanity, a vision embedded in our Judaism, elevates us; it actually exalts us. To believe in this God (or if you are a Jewish atheist, to be part of a community that believes in this God) is to care about and accept responsibility for everyone. No one is foreign to our concerns. The whole world is relevant to God and therefore must also be relevant to us – that would include China and El Salvador; we would have to care about the French and the Palestinians. To not do so would be to demote the God of the cosmos to a provincial deity.

Had Jonah been able to embrace this truth, he might have been our hero today. We could raise him up as a prophet who helped even strangers to change, who brought redemption even to his enemies. What an impressive legacy that would have been! (Think of how many little Jonah's would be running around!)

But, alas, Jonah must be forced into his prophetic journey and while his story has a happy ending, the heroes, the ones who respond to God's call to change and repent, are an unanticipated group.

The pagan sailors, when faced with the raging sea, pray to their gods to calm the waters but to no avail. They look for the source of this great storm and discover that it lies in Jonah who is hidden deep in the bowels of ship in an avoidant sleep. Jonah admits that the tempest has come because of his recalcitrance. He tells the sailors about his God and instructs them to throw him overboard to quell the waves. Reluctantly, the sailors toss Jonah into the sea and it does indeed subside. Inspired, touched, enlightened, the sailors turn from their pagan practices to worship Jonah's one universal God. Perhaps there is an insight in the language used in this chapter. At the beginning the shipmates are called *malachim* sailors but towards the end they are called *anashim* people. Perhaps this word-change hints to the potential of all humanity – God believes *anashim* people, all humanity, possess the ability to grow, evolve and consider new truths. Jonah son of Amittai clearly doesn't believe this. Ironically Amittai, Jonah's 'last-name,' comes from the word *emet* truth. Despite the evidence right in front of him, Jonah's remains stuck in his own immutable, distorted truth.

And then it all happens again. *The word of the Lord comes to Jonah a second time. Go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out to them.* Jonah is sure that the people of Nineveh are evil and unworthy of redemption. He conveys God's appeal to change only begrudgingly. Remarkably, the Ninevites, heathens in Jonah's eyes, change. They repent. The King himself puts on sackcloth, humbling himself before God. Like the ship filled with its *anashim*, its diverse people, Nineveh, this great city, is also a place teeming with humanity. In fact the two words in Hebrew: ship-*oh-na-ya* and *Nine-veh*, are near anagrams, a different version of the same thing. For the second time in this story, Jonah comes face to face with the world, humanity, the masses –all of whom choose to change – all except Jonah.

Most notably, this story is also about a significant change in God. Yes, even our God and the God of the universe, *Elohaynu Melech Ha'olam*, has shifted, evolved, grown, progressed. Perhaps some theologians would challenge this, those who think that God is perfect and complete and eternally right. But others know that this is not entirely so. Personally, I embrace a God who has the capacity to change.

Let's step outside of the Book of Jonah for a brief moment and look way back to the story of Noah. In her book Subversive Sequels In The Bible,ⁱⁱ Judy Klitsner teaches that Jonah and Noah are actually very closely connected. They both begin with God's distress about evil in world. Each story focuses on a man whom God selects to carry out God's will. In each there is a boat and an ocean and 40 significant days. At the end of his story, Noah sends out a dove as his messenger, to bring back the news that the flood is over and that he and all on the creatures on the ark have been redeemed, saved. Jonah is also a messenger, God's messenger to Nineveh and of course *Yonah* means dove.

While these stories clearly are linked, God has a very different relationship with humanity in each one. In the flood story, God instructs Noah to build an ark and save himself, his family and the animals. God does not ask Noah to engage with the outside world and address the evil in it. Noah doesn't offer. God's response to humanity's wrongs is destruction - total and complete annihilation.

How God has changed by the time we get to the Book of Jonah! In today's story, God turns to a prophet asking him to address the wickedness God sees. God gives Jonah agency to facilitate change. More than that, God believes humanity can change. God uses Divine power not for punishment and destruction but for love and redemption.

Too bad we read Jonah late in the day, when our stomachs are growling and our heads ache. I know an afternoon nap is a good way to get to the end of the long day of fasting but alas, many of us would miss hearing the powerful messages of this story.

As God calls out twice to Jonah, two truths call out to us as we come to the end of this most sacred season. Jonah may not understand it, but his story affirms, first and foremost, Judaism's deeply held belief that change is really possible. If the sailors can change, if Nineveh can change and if even God can change, I, too, must be able to change. It is not too late; I am not too old; I am not helpless; I have the ability to do this. As the hours pass throughout this holy day, it is our job to think about what part of our lives, our character, our future, we want to change. Can we alter our posture towards a person with whom we've been at odds? Can we break a pattern in our lives that we know is not good for us? Yes, I understand that some things cannot be changed, that some circumstances are truly beyond our grasp. But this first message of Jonah invites us to focus on what we can change, on what is mutable, on what we can transform within ourselves and to take the first steps toward making that a reality.

And then, as God calls to Jonah a second time, there is second message here that is equally powerful and important. When God asks Jonah to open himself up to the possibility that his enemies the Ninevites can change, God is also asking us to open ourselves to the possibility that someone, some group, some enemy, some 'other' can change too. Too often we refuse to entertain the idea that he, that she, that they, could alter their ways. We pigeon hole people into a box with no door. 'He will never understand me. She will never change her behavior. They are too stuck in their ways.' This was Jonah's problem, the one that kept him locked into his own rigid doubt. This is often our problem too. And like Jonah we retreat, we don't engage, we head in the opposite direction.

I've seen this in so many people. I have a friend whose father left his family when the kids were young. Over the years without him, my friend built up a pretty solid narrative about why his father left and why he never visited and how he didn't love him. When he became an adult, the dad reached out to him and his sister.

His sister accepted the opportunity in the extended arm. Indeed, she herself had revisited the past, and could see responsibility on all sides of the story. The account she carried with her had shifted. This opened some space for her to see the potential for change in her father. Her brother, my friend, on the other hand was still living his life constrained by his childhood narrative, projecting that rigidity onto others too. Ultimately the story had a happy ending. With the sister's intervention, relationships were healed. Her openness to change was the catalyst for his.

Sometimes it takes a shift in us, a new lens or perspective or realization, to see that others can shift too. Too often we lock down, turn our backs, we miss the chance to engage, to learn something new, to see the complexity of other people, their ideas and our world. And, we miss the relationships that could turn out to be fulfilling for us.

Once again, we see that the sailors understand this, the Ninevites understand this, while Jonah does not. In the story, as they engage with Jonah, they invoke a term that shows their openness. *Oo-lie* they say – *Oo-lie* - meaning "perhaps." Perhaps the God of Israel has the power to calm the sea! *Oo-lie*, perhaps we will be forgiven! *Oo-lie* is about possibilities; it is about potential, the potential to change, to improve, to repent and redeem. Jonah never says *Oo-lie*, not once in the entire book. He is closed to the possibility of change. But we mustn't be – not for us nor for others. The New Year is ahead of us and it is full of potential. We are invited to be optimistic, to embrace change, to grow and be redeemed.

I do still love the name Jonah even as I struggle with his book. *Oo-lie*, Perhaps, all of us, together with the Jonah's in the room, will be the messengers who change our world for the better. And through us, perhaps Jonah's name will take on a new meaning. *Oo-lie* – the possibility for change this Yom Kippur is limitless.

ⁱ Rabbi Harold Schulweiss, this phrase in a sermon on Jonah

ⁱⁱ Subversive Sequels In The Bible, Judy Klitsner. Maggid Books 2011 Pages 1-29, Chapter 1